The LADY of the BLUE MOTOR

T. EARL CHRISTY

G. SIDNEY PATERNOSTER

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Clarice Hudson.

THE LADY OF THE BLUE MOTOR

The Lady of the Blue Motor

By

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The Lady of the Blue Motor

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF A ROMANCE

I BEGAN to live precisely at 3.45 P.M. on Christmas Day of the year 190—. Now please do not mistake my meaning when I say that I commenced my life on this date. I do not assert that I was born then, for a reference to any of my friends would at once demonstrate the falsity of the statement, even if I were prepared to ask anyone to believe that within a few hours of my birth I was able to take part in an active adventure such as only occasionally falls to the lot of man in these unromantic modern days. What I wish to convey is that I, Geoffrey Hardinge, after having existed for twenty-seven years, began really and truly to live at the precise moment I have mentioned, and the place of my vivification was the salon of the Hotel des Fontaines at Versailles.

Let me recall the scene as it appeared to me at 3.44, when I entered the salon and ordered a cup of tea. The long room, with its array of empty tables, looked inexpressibly bare and cold, and the two waiters who stood at one of the windows looking out into the empty street were pictures of dejection. I ordered my tea, and with the assistance of the second waiter divested myself of the couple of coats I was wearing, before seating myself. The waiter who had helped me was of a saturnine disposition, for he retired again to his window, and left me to wonder what I was doing alone at Versailles on Christmas Day. Truth to tell, I should have been at a loss to give an adequate explanation had anyone required it of me. It was a mere freak on my part, born of ennui. I was staying in Paris for a few days, preparatory to going south in search of sunlight and a warmer atmosphere, and, after déjeuner, feeling a trifle hipped, I had ordered my car round, in the hope that I might escape in it from the blue-devils which I fancied were in pursuit of me. I had started out alone, for Coles, my valet-chauffeur, had met with a number of cosmopolitan professional automobilists at the garage where my car was stabled, and he had been eager, under their guidance, to make acquaintance with Parisian life.

At first, my remedy for the blues promised to be successful. The day was one of those clear, bright days of winter which set the blood tingling

in the veins and produce a pleasantly exhilarating sense of well-being in those strong enough to withstand the cold. A little snow had fallen during the preceding night, and though it had blown away from the surface of the road, it still clung to the grass and trees, and produced a fairy winter landscape to delight the eyes. I was well protected against the cold by a fur coat, covered by a leather jacket, and a heavy tweed overcoat on top of all, so that I was able to enjoy the winter landscape without experiencing any of the usually attendant discomforts.

When I started, I merely intended to content myself with an hour's spin in the Bois de Boulogne, but after I had been round a couple of times without recognising a familiar face, nor even resting my eyes on a face that appealed to me, it suddenly occurred to me that I should like to see what Versailles looked like, set in a winter landscape. Following the impulse, I passed through St. Cloud, and, after making a solitary pilgrimage through the park, I ultimately found myself a solitary visitor, sitting down to a lonely cup of tea, at the Hotel des Fontaines.

When I entered the salon of the hotel I immediately regretted my decision to remain, even though I knew from experience that nowhere in the world could I get a better cup of tea—I am a great tea-drinker, by the way, and my palate is inexpressibly shocked by the usual "Lipton" which the fair Parisienne produces with such satisfaction for the de-

lectation of her English visitors. But the sight of the empty salon and the two gloomy-browed waiters brought back the feeling of depression that I had thought to have dispelled. A feeling of utter loneliness came upon me. I could think of no reason for it. A day or two later I remembered that escargot had made one of the dishes at my mid-day meal, but at the time this simple explanation did not occur to my mind, and I was astonished at my depression. I was accustomed to be alone. I did not suffer from homesickness, for I knew no home and no home knew me. If I had been in London I should have, in all probability, been sitting down to a solitary cup of tea at my chambers in Ryder Street, St. James's, just as I was then doing in the salon of the Hotel des Fontaines. In fact, I had fled from London in order to escape the festive season, which held nothing festive in association for me, with the result that I was more passively miserable than I ever remembered to have been before, and—thank Heaven! —ever have been since.

Then something happened. I was sitting near one of the windows, with my back to the entrance. I heard the door open, and I also heard the rustle of a skirt. I was looking at my watch, which was lying open on the table before me at the moment, and thus it is that I am enabled to record with absolute accuracy the minute when I began to live.

Of course, I did not realise it at the time. One

does not spring full-fledged into comprehension of the fact that one is alive, but I know now that 3.44 was the psychological moment.

I looked up as a lady passed me. She traversed the full length of the salon and seated herself at the table farthest from the one I occupied. Judging from her attire, I concluded that she had arrived at the hotel *en automobile* like myself, and her thick fur coat and heavy motor veil effectually debarred me from making even a guess at her age or appearance. With the waiter's assistance she doffed the coat, and I waited for the removal of the veil; but seating herself, she gave an order in a voice that did not reach me, and made no signs of unveiling. Every moment I expected the door to open again and her companion or companions to arrive, and I amused myself by drawing imaginary pictures of them. Then the waiter brought in her tea, and I observed with surprise that he had brought a single cup. Clearly, the lady had made an appointment, and was before time; the mere fact that she did not raise her veil above the tip of her nose seeming to me to be confirmation of my conjecture.

I began to feel interested in the stranger, perhaps for the reason that now the heavy motor-coat was removed I could see that her figure had the contours of youth. Her mouth and chin, too, revealed the indescribable freshness of the springtime of life. I could conceive only one reason which should bring

her to Versailles on a shrewd winter afternoon, and almost unconsciously I began to envy the man whom I expected shortly to join her. She glanced often at a tiny watch she wore as a bracelet, and I remember thinking that the man who would keep a fair friend waiting for him under such circumstances was scarcely deserving of his good fortune. You see I had already come to the conclusion that she must be charming. Apparently quite unconscious of my scrutiny, she next took a little book from her pocket and scribbled something with a pencil on one of its pages. Now, I thought, she is writing a note reproaching her lover for his failure to keep his appointment. She still waited, however, and I still dallied with my tea in the hope that I should see what manner of man could be so dilletante a lover. When, about half an hour after her arrival, I saw her rise and seek the assistance of the waiter to resume her coat I was not greatly surprised, for she had waited quite twenty minutes longer than I had anticipated. I kept my seat as she came towards me, but when, as she passed my table, she stumbled I sprang to my feet. My assistance was not required, for by laying her hand upon the table she prevented herself from falling, and with a simple "Pardon, m'sieu," she bowed slightly and passed on. My eyes followed her to the door. "Curious," I muttered. "I wonder——"

At that instant I became conscious that a scrap

of paper, carefully folded, lay upon my table. It had not been there before. Glancing round guiltily to see whether I was observed, I unfolded the paper. This is what I read:

"I know you are English, and I know that an Englishman may be trusted to help a woman who may need assistance. If I am right follow the blue car."

I refolded the note deliberately and placed it in my pocket. Follow the blue car? Of course I would—from one end of France to the other if it were needful. Here at last was the beginning of what I had looked forward to for years. Adventure! Yes, here was a real adventure at last. The sort of adventure which had eluded my search on sea and on shore ever since I had come to man's estate, the search for which had set me wandering over the roads of Europe like a twentieth century Don Quixote mounted on a motor. Despite my previous ill success, I had known that romance was not dead, and now at last, when I had been far from expecting it, my elusive quarry had come within my grasp.

Such were the thoughts bubbling in my brain while I paid my bill and, putting on my wraps, passed into the courtyard of the hotel. It might have occurred to me that my high hopes might be doomed to speedy disillusionment, that instead of going forth so gaily in search of romance I was merely treading a well-worn path towards a commonplace

and sordid intrigue, but I was too sanguine for any such idea to enter my head. I stepped into the open air gaily.

When I gained the yard the veiled lady was already seated in her car. I knew that she could be no ordinary lady-automobilist, for, like myself, she was alone and, unless I was very much mistaken, the car was of a similar build to my own—a four-cylinder 60-horse Mercèdés—instead of the dainty toy car I had expected to see. I raised my cap as I passed her to show that I accepted her trust. I lighted my lamps, for the dusk was gathering fast, and I took my seat. A moment later the blue car glided out of the courtyard and with a preliminary blast from the horn I followed.

The cars soon left the houses of Versailles behind. My leader was not more than twenty yards ahead, running on the lowest speed over a nice level road, but as soon as she was clear of the streets the veiled lady accelerated the pace. Following her example I whipped in my third gear and so accurately was the distance between the cars kept that I was convinced that both cars had been built in the same workshop in the same year.

We had the roads to ourselves and, as we skimmed along in the gathering gloom, the snow-draped trees slipped by like a procession of ghosts, and I began to wonder whither I was bound. Then my guide slackened speed and turned off sharply

upon a narrower road so shaded by an avenue that I should have passed the junction with the highway unobserved had I been driving alone. In the darkness the bright lights of the blue car flickered ahead like a will-o'-the-wisp, and I have no doubt that any one in a normal condition would have considered my following those dancing beams to have been as fatuous a proceeding as the pursuit of a real marsh candle.

Yet, extraordinary as it may appear, it seemed to me to be the most natural thing in the world for me to be following an unknown guide along unknown roads to an unknown destination with an unknown object.

The blue car turned again. I followed. Again and yet again the car left one road for another, until any idea I may have had as to our position was completely dissipated. Once or twice we had passed through villages, but though I knew something of the country around Paris, yet in the darkness I could not recognise either of them. Thus we progressed for an hour at least, until with a warning hoot from the horn the leading car came to a stop under a high wall and, turning in her seat, the veiled lady beckoned to me to approach. At last, thought I, I shall learn something of the reason for these mysterious proceedings, and I ran my Mercèdés alongside the car I had been following.

As my car came to a standstill the veiled lady,

bending towards me, remarked, "I cannot thank you enough, Mr. Hardinge, for your response to my strange request."

I am not a ready speaker at the best of times, and this unexpected recognition of myself fairly took my breath away, so that instead of saying the right thing about my pleasure at being able to place my services at her disposal I gasped out, "Why—how the deuce? I—I beg your pardon—but you know me?"

The unknown laughed. Her laugh, like her speaking voice, was low-toned and sweet. It thrilled me like—well, once before I had experienced a similar thrill, and that was when, shortly after coming into possession of my first 60-horse car, I had found myself on a clear level road and, opening the throttle of the engine, I had given it a full dose of petrol. The laugh of the unknown thrilled me even as on the occasion I have mentioned the music of the winged spokes of the wheels beneath me, as the milestones flitted by, had stirred my blood.

"Does not every automobilist who looks at the automobile journals know the face of Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge?" she asked.

So that was the explanation. It was not unflattering, and it restored to me my sense of what was fitting.

"Let me assure you that Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge is very much at your service," I answered, though I

am afraid that I mumbled the words in my mask, for the unknown laughed again.

"I am more grateful than I can explain," she said, "for I am afraid that I am going to make some demands upon your good nature." She paused a moment before continuing, "There are few men I would trust, and though I know your face you are a stranger——"

I spoke up stoutly. "I think you may trust me."

"I think I may," she replied slowly, "I think I may." Then, moving from the driver's seat, and leaning over towards me, she laid her hand on my arm and continued earnestly: "Can I trust you to preserve absolute silence as to anything you may witness to-night? Can I trust you not only to keep silence, but to make no effort to seek any explanation of anything that may happen, nor attempt to discover who the actors may happen to be?"

My native common sense had not quite deserted me, for I hesitated before I answered diplomatically, "Well, you see, madame, you have the advantage of me in knowing who I am. Is it quite fair that I should be taken blindfold into something—anything —which——?" I stumbled over the word criminal, which was on the tip of my tongue, in a vain attempt to express my meaning more delicately.

The unknown lady apprehended my meaning, though I had not given the word utterance.

"I comprehend," she answered earnestly, "and

believe me, Mr. Hardinge, I will ask you to do nothing which may cost an honourable man's conscience a single moment's uneasiness. Indeed I do not ask you to do anything, only to be near me in case of need."

She spoke with so perfect an accent of truth that my reluctance to promise vanished.

"You may command me," I said simply.

"Thank you," she murmured, "thank you"; and, changing the subject abruptly, she said, "Can you tell me the time?"

I got at my watch with some difficulty and found that the hands marked a few minutes to six.

"My anxiety has brought me to the rendezvous too early," she said, "though I must not regret it, since it has assured me of your assistance. Now," she continued, "let me tell you all that I need you to do." She raised her hand and pointed into the darkness ahead. "About a couple of hundred yards farther on, at six o'clock exactly, a passenger awaits me. With that passenger I am returning to Paris."

"And you fear that he——" I began.

She laughed again. "No, I have no fear of my passenger," she remarked, "but we may be pursued. If so I shall want you, if it is within your power, to delay my pursuer. I do not think that anything can catch me until I reach the barrier, and then if I can get ten minutes' start I shall be safe. I want you to ensure for me that ten minutes."

"And I shall never see you again?" The words dropped from my lips involuntarily.

"Who knows?" she replied. "Only if we do meet and you should recognise me, I shall depend upon your forgetting that you ever followed a blue car from Versailles to the——" she stopped at the word and left me as much in the dark as ever as to where I was—"and from thence to Paris. Promise me you will forget," she demanded, with a pretty imperiousness which one associates with the demands of pretty women.

"That were impossible," I answered, "though I will promise to act as though I had forgotten."

I had barely heard her soft-spoken word of thanks before she resumed her seat at the steering wheel and, touching the starting lever, she glided away. I followed twenty yards behind until the blue car pulled up again opposite a pair of ornamental iron gates. Even as the car stopped, the gates opened and there passed through them a girl or woman, heavily cloaked, and bearing in her hand a little box or casket. She ran hastily to the car.

"He has returned, you must make haste, you must make haste," she cried.

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT PURSUIT

When I saw that another woman was to be the veiled lady's travelling companion, I understood why she had laughed when I had jumped to the conclusion that it was against the travelling companion that she might need protection. The words spoken by the newcomer also revealed to me that I might be called upon to redeem my promise of assistance and immediately I began to cudgel my brains as to what course to adopt. I could think of nothing, though I had very little time for thought, for as soon as the woman who had come through the gate had clambered into the car and wrapped herself in the rugs my leader started her car and I followed her example. When once we were moving I had something else to think about than making plans for an emergency which might not occur, for one's attention is pretty well occupied when following a 60-horse car running at top speed over roads one does not know, and my leader travelled at a pace which, had I been in front and on a track perfectly familiar to me, I should have been loth to have set.

She must have excellent reasons for haste, I concluded, as we bumped over the cobbled pavement of some village or other without slackening pace, merely announcing our advent with a blare of the horns which, had anything been in our way, would merely have served as a warning of the approach of death, without giving time for the warning to be of any service.

We had been moving for half an hour, perhaps, when I became conscious of a light in the sky which was absent when we started. It was the first signal of the rising of the moon, and I thanked heaven that I should be able to see a little more of the road than hitherto, but even as the atmosphere became appreciably lighter a big black mass gathered in front of us and in a minute rushed down and swallowed us up. We had plunged into a wood and the night was darker than ever. I guessed where we were now, however. I knew that in spite of all our turnings we had been bearing eastwards and had struck the forest of Fontainebleau, though at what particular portion I could not even guess. In a few more minutes we emerged upon a road which, from its breadth, as well as the line of telegraph poles, I knew must be the highway, and, wheeling to the left, the blue car swept on towards Paris.

Though our pace had been fast hitherto, considering the conditions under which we had been travelling, it was as nothing to what was to follow. No

sooner were we clear of the by-road than the driver of the blue car shot away on her highest speed. Not to be outdone, I followed suit, and the two big cars flashed along as if engaged in a race. Indeed, I could not help but give my admiration to the unknown woman in front, whom now I could see clearly in the moonlight, bending slightly over the steering wheel, driving her big car with the precision of an expert chauffeur and with a cool and reckless daring that few men would have exhibited.

Thus we swept on until the feeble lights ahead showed that we were approaching Paris, and my leader, slackening speed for the first time, signalled for me to approach.

I ran alongside and as I drew level I remarked, "Not much chance of anything on wheels overtaking you, madame."

"Perhaps not," she answered, "but nevertheless I want you to ensure for me ten minutes' start at the barrier. We shall be there directly."

I felt an unaccountable thrill of disappointment. My adventure had provided me with a rare sensation, and I had not expected so tame an ending. Besides, I wanted to know something more of the fair automobilist who drove so admirably. Still I had given my word, and there was nothing to be done but to fulfil my promise.

"You may count on ten minutes," I answered.

"Then good-bye and thank you," she replied, and once more slipped ahead.

I kept my distance until I came within sight of the barrier, and then I regretfully slackened off and stopped at one of the small petrol stores invariably to be found outside the confines of the city. A plan had occurred to me by which I might effectually detain any other car which might be following upon our track. So I had my tank filled and in addition I purchased two additional cans of petrol, though I knew very well that I could only claim to take in one duty free. The purchase did not take more than three or four minutes, and I had just resumed my seat when I thought I heard the sounds of the approach of another car. I started my engine and made for the barrier, where a couple of sleepy-looking officials awaited my arrival. The blue car was already out of sight, for the men, with the native politeness of their race, had passed the lady motorist with a merely formal examination. As I neared the gate I made the car swerve, and stopping just as it came diagonally across the road made it impossible for anything bigger than a bath chair to pass on either side.

No sooner was I in this position than the brilliant headlights of another car came into view behind, and a moment or two later it thundered up and stopped a couple of yards behind me. The new arrival was evidently in a hurry and I had not long

to wait before ascertaining that this was the pursuer whom the veiled lady had wished to escape, for he shouted an inquiry as to whether a car with two ladies on board had passed the barrier. The octroi men, however, were too busy attending to me to pay attention to his query. They had compared my permit with the quantity of petrol I carried and were busy in explaining to me that I must pay duty on the excess. I pretended not to understand them. They gesticulated. I also gesticulated. They grew angry when they learned from my gestures that I had no intention of paying. They bawled at me in French. I shouted at them in English. Meanwhile the newcomer demanded that he should be attended to and allowed to pass. I alighted and continued the conversation, paying no attention to his energetic demand. I should possibly have filled up the whole of the ten minutes in this fashion had not the pursuer left his car and joined us. He evidently assumed that I was an Englishman unacquainted with the French language, and perceived that his only means of getting on his way would be to act as interpreter between myself and the declamatory officials.

"Pardon, m'sieu," he said in very good English, "you seem to be in some difficulty. May I be permitted to give you assistance?" There was a trace of a foreign accent in his voice, which was that of a cultivated gentleman, while its tone was decidedly musical.

"Thank you, sir," I replied. "It is very good of you. I cannot in the least make out what these beggars want. I am taking in exactly the same amount of petrol as I took out with me this afternoon, as you can see."

I handed him my receipt, and he took it to the light of my head lamp to read. He lifted his goggles on to his cap for the purpose and I had a glimpse of his face. When I saw it I confess I was puzzled why any one should ever attempt to escape from him. It was an undeniably handsome face. The clear straight eyebrows, the thin aquiline nose, the clear-cut lips from which the dark moustache was carefully brushed back, the well modelled chin adorned with a slight imperial, were each of them so many testimonials to breeding. The expression on his features was simply an expression of tender melancholy. Altogether I was favourably impressed by what I saw and I was half inclined to make way for him, he seemed so inoffensive a creature. But when he lifted his eyes from the paper and cast a glance at me I saw in them more than was revealed in all the rest of the face. I was glad that the mask I was wearing shielded me from observation.

He handed my paper back to me with the remark, "If you took out two cans of petrol, m'sieu, the octroi only credited you with one. I see you did not leave Paris by this route." There was a ring of sus-

picion in his voice that warned me I had better be on my guard.

"No, I got lost," I said. "I know about as much of the environs of Paris as I do of French. I suppose I had better pay."

"Certainly, unless you desire to remain here and argue the matter for the rest of the night. Meanwhile I must beg of you to make way for me, as I am in a great hurry to overtake some friends of mine who are a little way ahead. Perhaps you can inform me whether a blue car with some ladies aboard has passed this way?"

"No," I answered; "the road was empty when I arrived and no one has passed since. But I shall make way with great pleasure."

I sprang into my car and laid my hand on the starting lever. The octroi men, evidently mistrusting my intention, immediately seized the two petrol cans, and, simulating anger, I jumped again to the ground and, unbuttoning my coat, produced a ten louis piece. This necessitated their bringing me change from the office, and when ultimately I glided off triumphantly it was with the consciousness that I had amply fulfilled my promise, for instead of ten minutes I had given the fugitives a clear quarter of an hour's start.

I started leisurely, and within a minute the pursuer thundered past. Then I quickened my pace in order to keep him in view. Something might have

happened to delay the blue car, in which case I yet might be of further assistance to the mysterious lady who had bespoken my assistance. It was not easy to keep on the track of the pursuer, for now that we entered Paris the traffic interpolated continuous obstacles. Yet I managed to do so somehow and after a while I followed the stranger's car into the Gare du Nord, arriving just as he alighted and entered the station. Leaving my own car with the engine running I followed him and I was rewarded with the sight of him standing on the departure platform and stamping his foot with vexation at some information which had just been communicated to him by a porter.

Clearly the veiled lady and her companion had made good their escape. That was all the information I should have been likely to gain and, realising that if their pursuer were to recognise my presence at the station he might connect me with the matter, I returned to my car and in a few more minutes wheeled it into the garage of the Grand Hotel, where I was stopping at the time.

CHAPTER III

AT THE CAFÉ DU QUATZ ARTS

COINCIDENTLY with the housing of my car I was awakened by certain inward qualms to the fact that I had lunched very early, and glancing at my watch I saw that my dinner hour was already past. I hurried off to my room for a change and wash, and while I performed my hasty toilet I had time to think. But the more I pondered upon the events of the afternoon the more puzzled I became as to the meaning of the game in which I had taken a hand. Rack my brains as I would, I could find no satisfactory theory to explain the riddle, while my promise forbade my making any enquiries which should help to satisfy my curiosity. That curiosity was to be still further taxed, for, though I knew it not, only a few hours were to elapse before I heard again of the mysterious lady of the blue car and was once more involved in an affair which could only add to my bewilderment.

I was not anticipating anything of the kind when, my toilet completed, I strolled out of the Grand entrance. I had achieved a considerable appetite, yet

despite it I dropped into a seat outside the Café la Paix and ordered an absinthe. Heaven knows I needed no appetiser, and when I emerged from the hotel it had been my intention to go straight to one of my favourite restaurants. Indeed, I had only left the hotel to dine because I had observed that a huge Christmas tree was erected in the hotel dining room, and that, together with the crowded condition of the room, threatened me with a shadow of the festivities which I had fled from in London. The fact was that even this glimpse of Christmas had brought back to me the melancholy strain of thought which had been forgotten in the excitement of the afternoon adventure, and I trusted to the inspiration of the absinthe to relieve me from a renewal of the gloom.

It had the opposite effect. Christmas has a meaning for some people, to me it had none—at least none that I wished to dwell upon. As a child I never had a chance of learning its happy import, and I had always been frankly envious of those who had learned of its magic—who were fortunate enough to have all sorts of delightful visions awakened by the mention of the season. My life, so it seemed to me, discontented ass that I was, had been more than commonly lonely. While I sipped my absinthe, looking with vacant eyes upon the shifting crowd on the boulevard, the past came back to me. Holiday times had all been dull and of them Christmas had been the dullest. I remembered a string of Christmases, and

they had been all alike—just an extra Sunday, with an additional dinner to take the place of evening service. There was my father at one end of the table and myself at the other, with Josiah to pour out my one glass of champagne. I do not blame my father that I retained no pleasant memories of these solemn functions. He was so immersed in his business that it was really the only occasion during the year when we were together for any length of time, while his youth had been left so far behind him that he could hardly have been blamed for forgetting what appealed to a boy. If I had had brothers or sisters no doubt things would have been vastly different, but I had neither, and my mother had died so soon after my birth that I had no recollection of her. Even so much of Christmas as had been mine on this annual occasion of my dining with my father had been taken from me when I was sixteen, for then, dying, he left me quite alone in the world. I have no doubt he thought he had done his duty by leaving me very well provided for. Poor old governor, I fancy he cherished hopes that I should carry on his business and looked forward to the time when he should retire in my favour. I believe that he might have had his wish but for the fact that he religiously dosed himself with his own wares—he made all his money out of a widely advertised patent pill.

Curious thoughts those to indulge in outside the Café la Paix on a Christmas night, you may think,

especially as the boulevards were thronged, for it was a dry, crisp night, but the fact remains that they did occupy my brain to the exclusion even of the thought of dinner.

I was awakened from my reverie by a very unexpected incident. Two chairs were placed at the little table at which I had seated myself and, almost unnoticed by me, the vacant seat was appropriated. I fancy the intruder would have escaped my attention entirely had he not raised his hat before seating himself. I just glanced at him, for I thought some acquaintance had recognised me. I had just decided that his face was not that of any one I knew, when my memory awoke actively. There opposite me was the man whose face I had seen an hour or two earlier in the evening by the light of my Bleriot lamp at the barriers of Paris. As I acknowledged his greeting in silence, I at once jumped to the conclusion that his presence at my table was due to this recognition of myself as the automobilist who had delayed him at the barrier. A second glance at his face reassured me. It was quite impassive. After all, his salute had been a mere formal courtesy to a complete stranger. A moment's consideration assured me that I had little reason to suspect that he could have guessed at my identity. Swathed in thick overcoats, with my cap pulled down over my ears and a mask covering the greater part of my face, I could have ventured to defy recognition even of my closest acquaintances.

Reassured as to the accidental nature of this second meeting, I had time for a closer scrutiny of the stranger than had been afforded me at the barrier. As I have already said, his face might have been termed handsome. Yet though I could find no particular feature in it with which to quarrel, there was something about it which seemed antipathetic to me, as of a shadow of something evil marring its good qualities. Probably this conclusion was mere prejudice on my part, for though, since then, I have discussed the question with dozens of people who have known him, nobody has ever shared my impression. At first glance one only read in his countenance a gentle melancholy which was partly due perhaps to his greying hair, the drooping moustache, and the set of his lips. This appearance of melancholy was, however, merely characteristic of his face in repose, as I discovered a moment later.

He had ordered coffee with some liqueur or other, and while he sipped his refreshment one of the toy merchants planted himself before us and endeavoured to unload upon me a sample of his wares. The fellow's patter was so amusing that I was constrained into making a purchase, and when he moved on to another possible customer, the stranger remarked, "You would not find that man's counterpart in London if you were to search for a month."

"No," I replied, "our street merchants are too

heavily loaded with the burden of existence to be gay."

"A fault of your whole nation, if you will permit me to say so," he replied, and his face lightened with a charming smile.

"You seem to have no hesitation as to guessing at my nationality," I remarked.

"Not the slightest," he said, lighting a cigarette with perfect nonchalance. "The nationality of Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge is surely known to every one in the motoring world, even as the risks he is quixotic enough to incur on the road are the despair of his well-wishers."

I rose and bowed, eyeing him keenly the while. Was there a hidden meaning in his words? Had he, after all, identified me with the motorist who had delayed him at the barrier? But there was no indication of anything of the sort in his glance.

"You have the advantage of me," I said.

He finished his coffee and rose to his feet. "If you are wise you will permit me to retain that advantage," he replied. "I would merely wish you to know me as a nameless friend who would warn you that your English desire to be of assistance to veiled ladies might happen to produce disastrous results."

Again his countenance was irradiated with a smile. I was about to blurt out some hasty reply when he stopped me with a gesture. "Permit me. My warning is in your own interests. You have in-

terfered in a matter which closely concerns me, possibly through ignorance as to the consequences of your action. I accept the excuse."

"I am ready to accept any responsibility for my actions," I answered hastily, for I had no mind to make excuse to any man.

"I am always ready to pardon a wrong committed in ignorance," he continued airily, "and your face has already excused you by telling me that you know absolutely nothing of the details of the little affair in which you intervened. Be content with the mischief you have wrought, for"—he flicked the ash from his cigarette—"I could not twice pass over outside interference in my affairs. I wish you good evening, m'sieu," and, raising his hat, he stepped on to the pavement and in a few seconds was lost to sight in the crowd.

I was far too bewildered to do anything for a minute at least. The recognition of myself as the person who had thwarted his pursuit, just when I had arrived at the self-satisfying assurance that recognition had been impossible, left me speechless, even if I could have found anything to say in defence of my action. And what could I have said? What right had I to intervene in private affairs of total strangers? The manner of the stranger's rebuke had been such that I was bound to admit that right had been entirely on his side and that from his point of view I deserved the rebuke. Yet I knew

very well that if I were appealed to again under similar circumstances I should act in precisely the same fashion. I knew, too, that for the chance of hearing once again the sweet voice of the unknown lady I should not hesitate about disregarding the warning which had been given me. Perhaps all the more because of the warning should I be tempted to meddle in affairs which concerned me nothing at all.

While seeking excuse for myself the stranger had disappeared, and no sooner did I realise this fact than I awoke to the consciousness that I had allowed the only chance of learning anything of the mysterious lady I was likely to get to slip away from me. I rose hastily from my seat and followed him. He had crossed the road, going in the direction of the Boulevard des Italiens.

It was a useless quest. I might just as well have set out on a search for the proverbial needle, for all the chance I had of meeting him again. The light-hearted crowd that thronged the boulevards had swallowed him up, and I had not traversed fifty yards before I realised the futility of my pursuit and cursed myself for having allowed him to depart unquestioned.

The warmth of my self-condemnation surprised myself. After all, I moralised, there was no need for me to lose my temper, and the realisation that I had lost it carried with it recognition of the reason. It was now close on nine o'clock, and I had eaten

nothing since déjeuner at twelve. It is a sorry confession to make, but I may as well admit that I am one of those unfortunate beings who do happen to get short-tempered when they are hungry. It was a state of things very easy to remedy, however, and so in a few minutes I was seated at a table and putting an additional edge upon a healthy appetite by a judicious selection from the hors-d'œuvres presented to me.

I dined well, and when an hour later I went out again into the night I could and did view the events of the day through the rosy light of a very excellent bottle of Pommard. The streets were fuller than ever, and for a while I strolled aimlessly along, paying little attention to the direction in which I was going and quite content to be a unit of the throng. Ultimately I saw the lights of the Moulin Rouge before me. I had no desire to enter that resort of the British tourist, but I was in that comfortable after-dinner state in which a little light entertainment appears a very desirable thing, so I made my way to the Café du Quatz' Arts close at hand. There I knew I should be certain to be amused, even if the entertainment should not prove to be of a very elevating character.

I entered the café, passing through to the inner room, which was much fuller than I anticipated, so crowded indeed that I had some difficulty in finding a seat.

Here, in order that my readers may understand an incident that was shortly to occur, let me describe the arrangement of the room I entered. Immediately to the left of the entrance was a platform raised a few inches from the ground. Upon this platform was a piano, and seated at the instrument was a woman idly striking a chord now and again as she chatted to a man standing beside her. By this arrangement of the platform the whole of the audience was seated facing the entrance, so that a late comer had to face the scrutiny of two or three hundred pairs of eyes. The apartment was a long one, the walls were covered with the grotesque imaginings of a generation of artists and the air was thick with tobacco smoke.

I found a seat in the fourth row of chairs, ordered the bock which entitled me to my seat and purchased a programme from the misshapen dwarf who was the pride of the establishment, and whose form and features had supplied the model for many of the artistic studies which decorated the walls. By the time my bock was brought to me the door was closed, the man on the platform faced the audience and announced the title of the song he proposed to sing. The chatter of the audience gave place to a hush of expectancy. I remember that I was looking at the pianiste, whose clear, colourless complexion was like dead white marble against her large black eyes and her thick black hair dressed low over her

ears, and wondering whether she would outlive the winter, when there came a sudden interruption. The door was thrown open and a feminine voice exclaimed in surprised accents, "Oh! Bon jour, m'sieu!"

Naturally every eye was turned to the door, and it was equally natural in that company that every voice should echo the greeting. A veritable babel of "Bon jour, m'selle," met her as she stood in the doorway, and then everyone looked round to see for whom the greeting had been intended. She stood in the doorway only a few seconds, for the artists of the Quatz' Arts do not submit to divided attention and the doors are religiously closed between the songs. She stepped back, the door swung to, and the song proceeded.

The song was an amusing one, but all the same I was glad when it came to an end, for I was in hopes that when the doors reopened some little drama of real life might be enacted for my amusement with the re-entry of the girl who had been surprised into the exclamation. She was to all appearances a little grisette, not quite of the cocotte type, and I judged that she must have recognised some former lover in the audience. I never for one moment dreamed that her presence there could in any way be due to me. But when the applause burst out upon the completion of the song, and the door being reopened the girl entered, she came straight to where I was sitting,

and, plumping herself full on my knee, she threw her arms round my neck and saluted me with a hearty kiss.

I do not think that many men have been placed in such a predicament and I should like to know from my readers how they would have acted under the circumstances. To be suddenly pounced upon and kissed by an unknown girl before two or three hundred people is surely sufficient to upset the balance of any man. When it is further remembered that the onlookers were of Paris Parisian, that they were at an entertainment more noted for its wit than its propriety, and that every one of them had some remark to make upon the heartiness of the greeting accorded me, it may be possible to picture my embarrassment. I could only conceive that I was the victim of a mistaken identity or had been suddenly appropriated by a madwoman, and I wondered whether I had not better free myself by main force from the arms which encircled my neck rather than suffer the embrace until opportunity arose for a quiet explanation.

I did not need to cogitate long. The girl allowed her head to droop on my shoulder and as her lips reached the level of my ear she whispered, "M'sieu Geoffray Hardinge?" giving my name a purely French pronunciation.

The start I gave nearly upset the chair upon which I was seated in spite of its double load.

"Sh—sh!" she said softly, and her clasp tightened

round my neck. "Do not move," she continued in broken English, "I have to bring you to M'selle of the Blue Car."

The occupants of the crowded room danced round me in a wild phantasmagoria. The smoke wreaths shaped themselves into grinning faces. The notes of the piano jangled some unknown bizarre melody.

"You mus' put your arm round me," whispered the voice and I obeyed. "And speak you la Français."

Then she raised her head from my shoulder and gave me an opportunity to recover my scattered senses. Poising herself on my knee and placing one hand on each of my shoulders she addressed me with a torrent of words in her own tongue. In a couple of minutes I learned more about myself than I had ever suspected. I learned, for instance, that I was that unknown girl's own Jules—that she would never forgive herself for her cruelty to me—that she was faithful, indeed she would kill herself rather than take another lover—that she would die if I did not return to her—that I must forgive her that very instant.

I forgave her amid the applause of the members of the audience near enough to hear what passed.

She would never, never leave me again. Her eyes had not been dry for two weeks—she was grown so thin that she would be ashamed before me.

Her frankness was so appalling that I hastened to

stop further remarks by suggesting that we were interrupting the progress of the entertainment. She seemed to appreciate the force of my remarks and, rising, I tucked her hand under my arm and made for the door. Our exit was triumphal and the bravas and the laughter still rang in our ears, even when we had passed through the café and stood on the pavement outside.

The crisp cold air blowing upon my face seemed to restore to me my self-possession. I turned to my companion. "Now will you please explain to me the reason for this remarkable behaviour?" I asked.

"There is no time to waste," she replied. "The night is passing and m'selle bade me bring you early. Will m'sieu please to call a fiacre."

CHAPTER IV

I MEET THE LADY OF THE BLUE CAR

I WAS in two minds about doing as I was bidden. My natural cautiousness was at war with my desire to hear once again the sound of the voice of which I cherished so pleasant a recollection. Nor was I destitute of curiosity as to the meaning of this sudden desire for my society on the part of unknown persons.

"Surely, m'sieu is not to be so ungallant as to refuse a lady's invitation," remarked my companion reproachfully.

The question decided me. I beckoned a passing cab. "Where to?" I asked without further parley.

"The Quai d'Auteuil," was the answer.

"Why, that must be right at the other end of Paris," I objected as the cab drew up at the curb.

"I take you to the very last house inside the barrier," said the girl demurely, as she stepped into the vehicle. "If m'sieu had only his automobile m'selle would be better pleased that she was not so long kept waiting. Make the *cocher* to understand that he must drive fast."

Again I hesitated. What if some plot were afoot to lure me into the hands of some band of desperadoes? But the thought was dismissed almost as swiftly as it had entered my brain. I could not imagine the lady who had sought my assistance to be a member of a criminal gang. I gave the driver the address and a half louis piece as an earnest of the *pourboire* he might expect if he would drive his hardest, and jumping into the cab, I closed the door.

I had never imagined that any cab horse in Paris could have got over the ground at the pace at which the animal in the shafts of that cab did. We rattled and bumped and swayed and heaved, much to the apparent terror of my companion, who gripped my arm tightly with both hands and gave a shriek every time we swerved round a corner. I had expected to have obtained some sort of explanation as soon as we were alone together, but the rattle made by the cab as we went over the stones at a hand gallop made it impossible for us to exchange a word. Such a pace could not last, of course, and when a little later the driver's first enthusiasm had to some degree evaporated and we were at the same time traversing a smoother road, I turned to my companion and remarked, "Now, may I ask the meaning of this nonsense?"

"Indeed I should be most happy to tell, m'sieu, but I know nothing myself," was the astonishing response.

"Know nothing?" I repeated incredulously. "You know nothing?"

"M'sieu doubts me, but indeed I know nothing except that I make a guess that m'sieu can ask the question of his heart and find a pleasant answer."

There was a tinkle in her voice which sounded like laughter and led me to discount her pretence of ignorance. I wished that there had been light enough for me to have seen by the expression of her face how far she was telling me the truth.

"At least you can tell me how it happened that you singled me out from the crowd in the Quatz' Arts, and how you knew that I was there?" I asked.

"And with pleasure, m'sieu," she replied promptly. "I had asked for m'sieu at the Grand Hotel earlier in the evening and it was even as I made enquiry that m'sieu passed me. 'See, that is M'sieu Geoffray Hardinge,' said the commissionaire, and I made haste to follow. But m'sieu takes long steps and my feet go but slowly. I felt that I should need to run and make a scene in the street, but as m'sieu passed under the archway of the hotel I saw that he was followed, so I waited."

"Followed?" I queried in surprise.

"The gentleman who sat with m'sieu outside the Café la Paix was watching m'sieu, and I had been warned not to communicate with m'sieu if the dark gentleman was anywhere near."

"Then you know him; who is he?" I asked.

"M'mselle will doubtless inform m'sieu," answered the girl. "M'sieu will forgive me that I am forbidden to speak his name."

"Well, continue," I answered resignedly.

"And with pleasure," she continued. "Seeing that m'sieu was watched I did not approach him. Then, when the dark gentleman left him, I saw that there was another man watching m'sieu. Ciel! It was a great amusement. There was m'sieu the mouse and the cat watching him and I watching the cat, while m'sieu dined and walked. Indeed, not until he entered the Quartz' Arts did m'sieu's shadow leave him."

"Really, I had not the slightest idea that I was being shadowed," I said.

"It is strange that m'sieu should be unaware that he is of so much interest to so many people, then," remarked the girl archly. "He has not thought that if he had made an impression other people may see in him a rival." The girl stopped.

"Nonsense," I said, though my pulse began to beat a little more quickly.

"M'sieu is modest surely, though no doubt he knows best," replied the girl demurely.

"Of course I know best," I answered a little sharply. Then I was silent awhile and my companion also was silent until I set her tongue wagging by means of another question.

"What made you accost me in such an outrageous fashion?" I asked.

"M'sieu has pardoned me, has he not?" she asked, and again I detected the tinkle of laughter in her voice. "Consider, m'sieu, for one moment my difficulty. I enter the room and it is full of eyes looking at me. I see m'sieu, but he knows me not, and I have to attract his attention. Suppose that I had entered quietly. There was no seat vacant by m'sieu's side. If I had spoken to him he would have told me to go away, and how terrible that would have been under the gaze of all those eyes. It was of necessity that I embraced m'sieu, that I might whisper my message in his ear."

"You are a forward little hussy," I remarked.

"Hussée? Hussée? What is that?" she asked. "Is it to be glad to sit on the knee of m'sieu? If it is so I should like to be hussée once again."

She placed her hand on my arm again. I made no response. Then she sighed and said softly, "Ah! M'sieu is very handsome and m'selle is very fortunate."

I will not excuse myself for what followed. Her hand was a little one and we were both young. She was pretty, too, with the piquant prettiness of her class. Besides, I thought a little familiarity might assist me to obtain some information which might prove useful and, well——

"It is nice to be a hussée," she remarked a minute later.

She chattered away merrily, but any anticipations I had formed as to getting any information were doomed to disappointment. She brushed aside any attempts I made to obtain enlightenment with an ease which either proved that I was one of the clumsiest of diplomats or that she was one of the cleverest. At last I asked her point blank whom I was going to see, and her only reply was, "M'sieu will learn in good time, and it is very cruel of m'sieu to remind me that the end of our drive will come so soon."

The end of our journey did in fact come much sooner than I anticipated, for my companion was undeniably sprightly, and before I had imagined that we were more than half way to our destination the fiacre stopped and we had arrived. I assisted my companion to alight, and as I did so asked whether I should keep the driver to take me home.

"M'sieu's modesty is overwhelming," she answered, "or does m'sieu really propose to keep him waiting until to-morrow?"

There was no mistaking the inuendo, and with my blood tingling in my veins I handed the driver a *pourboire* which would have satisfied the most rapacious of his class and followed my guide.

The cab had drawn up outside a large six-storied building, which had nothing between it and the

Seine but the road and the wall of the embankment. A few doors away the lights of a cabaret gave the only semblance of life to the deserted Quai.

"This way, m'sieu," said the girl.

I followed her round the angle of the building until we came to a door shrouded in darkness. The door was unfastened, so we entered without the necessity of disturbing the concierge.

"If m'sieu will place his hand on my arm he will not fall and m'selle's apartment is at the top," said the girl as we stepped inside the doorway.

I did not quite like blundering blindfold into a strange house, for the stair was unlighted, but I did not contemplate drawing back.

"As if one need a light where m'selle leads," I replied with a laugh.

"Sh," she answered. "Allons!"

Those stairs seemed in the darkness a veritable Eiffel tower, and I was breathless when my guide paused and I heard her groping for a lock with a key.

"We are at home," she said. "Permit me first to enter."

The door opened and I followed her into the tiny hall of a small flat. As we entered, a voice cried from a room within, "Is that you, Lucille?"

I recognised the voice instanter. I could never have mistaken the voice of the lady of the blue car whose flight I had covered earlier in the day.

"Yes, m'selle," replied the girl, "and m'sieu accompanies me." She turned to me. "M'selle prefers to greet you alone." She indicated a half-open door on the right of the hall, and passing through a similar door exactly opposite to it on the left she disappeared.

There seemed something uncanny in the absolute silence which seemed suddenly to descend upon the house. My heart began to thump heavily—it was not with fear.

I pushed open the door and entered. I found myself in a long, low-ceiled apartment, furnished with a sort of shabby splendour as if with the discarded lumber of a palace. I only noticed the furniture because it formed so strange a contrast with the one occupant. When my eyes rested upon the picture I had no desire to bestow attention upon the frame. I saw a girl—woman—slender and fair, sitting in a Louis XV chair from which the gilt was peeling and the tapestry frayed away. A sable toque was laid on the table beside her and a sable cloak had dropped into a heap on the floor at her feet. The light of a shaded lamp at her elbow was reflected from a hundred shining strands of hair, and threw a faint rosy flush on her translucent brow and cheek. Her face was in profile. My imagination had not played me false when it had pictured beauty hidden beneath the motor coat and veil.

I came three or four paces into the room and

there to a standstill. Neither by movement nor by gesture did the occupant of the chair betray the slightest interest in my presence. I need scarcely say that this was not quite the manner of greeting I had been led to expect. Her attitude was not that of a woman expecting a casual friend, much less that of a woman waiting to greet a bidden lover. And it was to that height my thoughts had reached. I had very little warrant for such an assumption. Merely the chatter of the maid and the indiscretion of my own youthful imagination. But the sight of her face put all such imaginings to flight. Whatever the reason which had led to my summons to that house, I knew that I had done her a grievous injury in my thoughts, and I felt myself flushing with shame. Yet, strange as it may seem to some who may read this narrative, I was not sorry that my anticipations were to be falsified. The voice which had sought my assistance had been an honest voice. At the moment of hearing it I had idealised its owner and I was glad that my ideal was not to be shattered so swiftly. A night of dalliance is after all a poor exchange for a shattered ideal. So while I waited for the unknown lady to speak, the subtle inuendoes of the maid Lucille faded from my thought.

I might have stood waiting for thirty seconds, or the time might have been longer, before she broke the silence. Then she remarked, without raising her eyes from the little foot extended to the fire, "Well,

M'sieu le Comte d'Hautville, have you nothing to say to me? You were not used to be silent when we were accustomed to meet, and this interview, if you remember, was of your seeking."

I could not believe my ears. I looked behind me to see if by chance some one else had entered. But we were alone.

"I—I beg your pardon, m'selle," I stammered.

My voice brought about an abrupt transition in the attitude of my companion. She lifted her eyes and the moment they met mine she sprang to her feet.

"Who are you? What——" she began. But she gave me no time to answer her question. The light of recognition came into her eyes and even as it dawned there the note of surprise in her voice changed to one of anger.

"This is outrageous, Mr. Hardinge," she said in English. "I trusted to your honour as an English gentleman that you would make no attempt to follow me, and yet you even push yourself unannounced into my presence. I presume, by bribing my maid."

The scorn in her voice cut me like a whip, but it restored my self-possession, and I saw instantly that I must be the victim of some mistake which could only be cleared up by a direct explanation.

"You do me an injustice," I answered. "I am here at the direct invitation of your messenger."

"You came here by invitation?" she repeated with incredulity plainly visible in her expression. "Really,

sir, your invention is lamentably dull if you cannot devise a better story than that. There is only one thing to be said in its favour and that is that it may be so easily answered. I can assure you that not only have I sent you no message, but I can think of no one at the moment whose presence could be more distasteful to me."

How well anger became her—the face lifted haughtily, the lips curved with scorn, the eyes looking fearlessly into mine, made a perfect picture of resentful beauty. But what was I to do? I half turned to depart, but I could not let her retain the impression that of my own volition I had thrust myself upon her.

"Perhaps I expressed myself badly, m'selle," I said. "I meant to convey to you the simple fact that I found myself here in consequence of a message I received saying that the lady of the blue car wished to see me."

"And pray who was this messenger?" she asked.

"The messenger was the girl you called Lucille," I replied.

"The maid, of course," she commented scornfully. "You will hardly tell me to my face that I sent her to make an appointment with you. You must be possessed of a fair conceit, Mr. Hardinge."

That floored me. For a moment I thought that I was the victim of a woman's caprice, but I could not look on her face and harbour the idea. She was un-

deniably angry and astonished at my arrival and she looked at the door in a way that was almost a command as she moved to the bell. I suppose my face must have disclosed the astonishment I could not find words to express, for she paused and said more gently, "Do you still mean to maintain that you are here in deference to what you believed was a message from me?"

"I do," I answered stoutly. "I believe I am in full possession of all my senses, and until I arrived here after driving from the other end of Paris I had not the faintest idea as to where you lived. It seems to me that I have been made the victim of a practical joke on the part of some one unknown to me. I can only regret that you should also be the sufferer."

"You really mean that?" she asked, and coming nearer to me she looked me squarely in the eyes.

"I have spoken the exact truth," I replied, and I saw at last that she believed me.

"I cannot understand," she murmured, and I seemed to be aware of a vague fear creeping into her face.

"There is an easy means of ascertaining the meaning of it all," I suggested. "Why not ask Lucille? She brought me here from Montmartre?"

"I will," she said, and she raised her hand to the bell. But before she gave the summons the door opened and there entered a man, smiling, débonnaire, evidently in the best of humour with himself and the

world. I recognised him at a glance. It was the motorist I had stopped at the barrier; it was the melancholy stranger who had sipped his coffee at the same table as myself at the Café la Paix, the man who had warned me against meddling with his private affairs.

CHAPTER V

MY LADY MELODÉ

A TENSE silence held all three of us in its grip, a silence which the newcomer was the first to break. He moved toward the girl with outstretched hands. "Welcome!" he said. "Welcome, my dear Melodé, to Paris."

She refused the offer of his hands, and they dropped to his side, but the smile still remained on his face, which she scanned eagerly. I glanced from one to the other, and I noticed the light of comprehension breaking through the expression of bewilderment which had remained on her countenance since I had persuaded her that I had honestly believed myself to have come to her presence at her own invitation.

"So it is to you that I am indebted for this gentleman's presence?" she asked of the Comte, bowing slightly toward me.

"To me?" he replied, and his air of astonishment was either real or so admirably assumed that it exactly simulated reality. "To me? Really, my dear Melodé, you credit me with an amount of self-abne-

gation which is entirely foreign to my temperament."

The girl persisted quietly, though her lip quivered.

"I must ask you to explain this gentleman's presence, M'sieur le Comte d'Hautville."

"You ask me to explain?" he answered, mockingly. "But surely you have no need to ask. You ask me, who know nothing, to explain the obvious. I see a beautiful woman and a handsome man. They are obviously at home. This is m'selle's flat, I think. M'selle has the right to invite her own friends to visit her. I am a man of the world. I do not question m'selle's right."

A flood of crimson swept across her face, and my fingers involuntarily clenched themselves into a fist, but quite impassively he continued: "It is true that when I heard of your arrival I thought that it was to see me that you were in Paris. I know that women are the same all the world over, and I even fancied that jealousy might have brought my charming friend Melodé to Paris. Alas! I am mistaken. It was not to see me. Yet I had thought also that my dear Melodé was of the cold temperament that her countrywomen call virtuous. I should have remembered from my own experience that they are not always as cold as they seem to be. But you may rely upon me. It was not my fault that I did not call at the time appointed earlier in the evening. My

eyes are blind to the presence of Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge in my Lady Melodé's flat. Why should I say anything indeed?"

"You know that you are talking nonsense," replied Lady Melodé quietly, though it was with an effort that she controlled her voice.

"Nonsense?" he replied. "Is it nonsense that Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge"—he dwelt with a steady persistence upon my name, as if he would show that it was not likely to escape his memory—"that Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge assisted my Lady Melodé in a little adventure this afternoon; that my Lady Melodé's maid delivered to him a message in a café this evening and left with him to drive to the flat which my Lady Melodé had engaged for a short period? I wonder what my Lady Melodé's friends in England would say if they were to hear of the adventure."

The distress written on the girl's face forced me to enter the conversation.

"If any such adventure is even whispered," I blurted out, "I shall know whom I am to call to account."

D'Hautville laughed merrily. "Hearken, my dear Melodé, he said, "to your quixotic young friend. Is he not an ideal champion for a lady in difficulty? He is ready at a moment's notice to tilt with the windmills of scandal for a glance of your bright eyes."

I was about to make an angry retort when Lady Melodé checked my speech.

"You must have bribed Lucille to bring Mr. Hardinge here," she said. "Did you do so for the mere object of compromising me?"

He evaded the question. "Bribed the incorruptible Lucille?" he answered, turning to me. "Does one bribe Lucille with kisses, m'sieu?" He turned again to Lady Melodé. "They had a long drive together in the fiacre and I doubt not your young friend can tell you much more of Lucille than I."

His knowledge was sufficient evidence to my mind that he must have been in league with the maid, and had already learned from her of the ease with which I had been befooled, and the malicious emphasis he put upon his words made me suspect that one of his objects had been to raise a barrier between myself and the woman into whose presence I had been brought. Perhaps he had counted upon my instant dismissal in anger when I had entered her presence, probably thinking that I should have given immediate expression to the hopes which had been so artfully instilled into my brain during the journey. If so, that hope had been disappointed, and now he had hit upon another means of lowering me in Lady Melodé's esteem. My anger grew hotter by reason of the fact that I had no reply at the tip of my tongue. "You will bring it on yourself," I muttered, as I drew a little nearer to him.

As for Lady Melodé, her face grew strangely thoughtful. "Let us understand each other," she said. "What are you hoping to gain by all this?"

He answered as airily as before. "My dear Melodé has the business acumen of her race, and in deference to her wish I will myself stoop to bargaining. I have ventured to hint at the possibility of this adventure becoming known. Let me suggest that the most certain method of keeping the matter from the knowledge of anyone but ourselves would be for my dear Melodé to accept the proposals which on previous occasions I have made to her."

"No, no, no!" she cried, emphatically.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Of necessity my lips would be closed, and doubtless my dear Melodé knows upon how many subjects it is desirable that I should be silent. There is——"

"Silence!" she cried.

"And for ever," he answered, "on my conditions."

She turned wearily and looked into the fire. It seemed as if her courage was beginning to fail her, and I longed to say or do something which should bring her comfort. But I was so ignorant of the motives animating the two, so full of amazement at the conversation, that I was helpless as a dummy.

"Come, my dear Melodé," he said, "you surely need not take long to decide. Will you give me your promise, or shall I leave you to the consequences—and Mr. Hardinge's arms?"

He had overstepped the line at that remark. My blood had boiled every time he had mentioned her name with such insolent familiarity, now it boiled over. I heard the girl murmur "How dare you! How dare you!" as she raised her hand to veil her face. Then I stepped forward.

I hit him twice. My left took him straight between the eyes, and as he came back on a rebound from the wall, I caught him with a half hook under the jaw which toppled him over. He dropped heavily, smashing one of the gilded chairs in his fall, and lay still on the polished floor. I do not think I ever struck a man with more satisfaction.

Then I turned my attention to Lady Melodé, and observed that she was gazing with horror at the prone figure.

"What—what have you done? Is—is he dead?" she whispered.

"No such luck," I answered, feeling pretty well satisfied with myself, for though I knew I had hit hard, I judged that I had merely knocked him out. "He will probably come round in a minute or so."

"But suppose he does not recover, what will happen? Oh, I dare not face it!"

"It would be a bit awkward," I assented, "for I could hardly plead that I hit him in self-defence." The remark sounds rather cold-blooded, but at the moment I was anxious to restore my companion's self-control.

My method was successful, for she pulled herself together and bent over the prostrate figure. "He is still breathing," she said, after a brief examination. Then she rose to her full height and looked at me. "What are we to do?" she asked.

"When he comes round, I'll drive him back to his hotel or wherever he comes from," I said, for no other method of dealing with the situation suggested itself to me.

Her face puckered in thought.

"You do not know M. le Comte," she said, "or you would never make such a proposal."

"I have heard his name somewhere," I answered, "but it conveys nothing to me."

"He will never forgive either you or me for that blow," she continued. "We must both begone before he is sufficiently recovered to take any action."

"Don't you think you unnecessarily alarm yourself?" I answered, for I did not anticipate any very terrible results.

"You do not know him as well as I do," she replied, "or you would be aware that his capacities for mischief are unlimited. He is a man with some influence, and suppose that he were to call on the police. I—I could not face the publicity. You could not guess what it would mean. You heard what he said to-night, how he threatened to speak of certain things. Suppose your name was to be coupled with mine in a police case—and he would do it. It was

foolish of me to think of meeting him again—I might have known that I should only be placing myself in his power."

She was becoming hysterical, and I thought it time to interrupt.

"Well," I said, "if that is your view of the matter, the sooner we leave here the better."

"But where can we go?" she said, despairingly. "He can describe both of us so well that we shall never be able to leave Paris, much less hide ourselves here."

I looked at my watch and made a rapid calculation.

"If you will trust yourself to me," I said, "you shall be safe in England to-morrow evening."

"But how?" she asked. "The trains——"

"Will you trust me?" I interrupted.

"I needs must," she answered, and with a wan smile she placed one of her little hands in mine.

"Then put on your cloak," was my next command, "while I make sure that our friend here will come round without assistance," for I had no desire to have his death on my conscience.

He was still breathing heavily, but there was a flicker about his eyes which told me that his scattered senses would soon return to him.

"If you have any luggage, you had better get it together," I suggested, "though I am afraid that I cannot undertake to carry more than one bag."

"Everything is ready," she replied simply.

Picking up her cloak, I held it while she fastened the clasp. She seemed to be deeply immersed in thought, for she gave me no word of thanks, but crossed the floor to where d'Hautville lay.

"I wonder——" she remarked. Then she dropped on one knee beside the unconscious man and deliberately unbuttoned his coat and placed her hand in the pocket.

"Oh, hang it all, this won't do!" I said, for although I had knocked the man out, it seemed a caddish thing to do to stand by while he was being robbed. But the girl took not the slightest notice of my remonstrance. A pleased expression appeared on her face as she drew a letter case, stuffed to bursting, from the breast pocket and rose to her feet.

"Oh, come now, this won't do at all," I said, as I moved to her side and laid my hand on the packet.

She turned upon me fiercely. "What is it to do with you, Mr. Hardinge?" she cried. "Even if I accept your help I cannot allow you to dictate to me as to my conduct!"

"That is all very well," I answered, "but I do draw the line at some things. I don't much mind if I had put that chap through the mill once and for all," I explained, "for he earned all that he got, and more, too; but I should not like to think that he lost anything but his life in consequence of my action. Besides, suppose that he should not pull round, after

all? At present I am quite equal to facing the music, but I should not like to have robbery suggested as a motive."

She listened to me, and a smile flashed across her face.

"What quaint, illogical creatures men are!" she explained. "Here you are, apparently undisturbed by the thought of being charged with robbing a man of his life, yet morally palsied at the thought of taking from his possession a few letters."

"It may seem illogical to you," I remarked, "but to me there is no paradox involved in my position. I had a just and reasonable excuse for knocking him down, I have none for taking his property."

"But suppose I have a more adequate reason for taking his letters than you had for knocking him down, are you going to argue that your moral responsibility is to take precedence of mine?"

"I don't know the circumstances," I answered, dubiously.

"I cannot tell you them, Mr. Hardinge," she said, "but cannot you trust to me? I tell you that I have the best reason in the world for possessing myself of these letters." She untied a string that bound the bundle together, and spread them on the table. "At least you shall be assured that nothing save letters are here—that I am no common thief."

I strove to assure her that I had no suspicion that

she was actuated by any mercenary motive, but she thrust my apologies aside.

"Why should you not attribute the basest of motives to me?" she said. "The peculiar chain of events which has brought you here to-night, my association with that man, are surely sufficient to warrant you in mistrusting me. But look"—she spread the letters widely and turned the case which had contained them inside out—"you can see I am not taking money."

"No," I replied, "but letters are sometimes more valuable than money. Besides, with those in your possession the Count will have a definite excuse for arresting us."

"I know! I know!" she cried. "But I must face even that risk. If you only knew what the possession of these letters means to me and to others, you would not, I am sure, contest my right to get them by fair means or by foul. It was to obtain them by fair means that I made an appointment to-night with that particularly fine gentleman there"—her gesture as she pointed to the recumbent figure spoke eloquently of abhorrence. "You must allow me to retain them. If not—well, I must do my best to get away alone."

Against my judgment I surrendered my scruples. "Come," I said, "the Count is already reviving."

She had already replaced the letters in the case, and thrusting it inside her cloak she preceded me

from the room. We were none too soon. The Count had stirred, and as she passed through the door he raised himself on one elbow. My last glance carried away the memory of a face very different from that of the débonnaire Parisian who had entered the room half an hour previously—the memory of a face all puffed and blackened, with the hair dishevelled, and the moustache drenched with blood. I closed the door carefully behind me and turned the key in the lock. Lady Melodé had picked up a small dressing bag which stood beneath a little table in the hall. I took it from her hand.

"What about the maid, Lucille?" I asked.

"She must have been in league with him. It would be better to leave her behind," said my companion.

I nodded, and it was the work of a second to turn the key in the lock of the door on the other side of the passage.

"They will be safe until they can arouse someone to come and let them out," I remarked, as we emerged on to the staircase and closed the front door behind us.

We blundered down the five long flights of stairs, expecting every moment to hear some outcry raised. We reached the open air. The chances of obtaining a vehicle I judged would be of the slightest at that hour of the night in that locality.

"I hope you are not afraid of walking?" I remarked.

"Not in the least," she answered, "but what are your plans?"

"First to get to the Grand as soon as may be," I answered. "But let us hasten; there will be plenty of time to discuss plans later."

I strode away at a rate which taxed all my companion's powers, and for ten minutes we saw not a sign of anything living. Then fortune favoured us with a sight of a fiacre drawn up outside a cabaret. A babel of voices issued from within, and in view of possible pursuit I hesitated about entering and exposing myself to the scrutiny of the inmates. I had just made up my mind to take the risk, when the driver made his appearance, and I at once tackled him. He was on his way home, and loth to take a new fare; but the substantial golden arguments was able to adduce ultimately persuaded him to comply with my wishes. My companion entered the cab. I followed, and we drove away at once in the direction of my hotel.

CHAPTER VI

A FLIGHT BY NIGHT

No SOONER was the cab in motion than my companion renewed her enquiry as to my plans. Now a method of leaving France had presented itself to my mind through which I should be certain of several hours of her society, and at the moment I did not desire to look more than a few hours ahead. But the adoption of my idea would mean no inconsiderable degree of exposure to weather and fatigue, and I could not bring myself to believe that there was any danger in returning to England by the ordinary route. When I had heard d'Hautville's name mentioned, I knew that I had heard it before, and while we had been plodding along in search of a cab I recalled where and what I had heard of the man who bore it. There was nothing to his discredit in what had reached my ears. Indeed, it was by the merest chance that I had never met him, for I remembered that he was a leading light in French automobilism, and had a reputation as being a sportsman to the finger tips. If then, I argued, his reputation did not belie him, he would desire to settle matters with me

personally rather than through the intervention of any third party. I did not dwell on the thought of what form that settlement would take. I had heard that he had a very delicate finger for a trigger, and that his wrist was of steel, while though I could do my duty at the corner of a covert, I had never handled a pistol in my life, and my knowledge of fence was absolutely nil. However, there is never any advantage to be gained by considering the amount of one's bill before presentation, so I dismissed the thought. Yet in considering these things I could not fail to come to the conclusion that it would hardly be sporting to subject a woman to hardships which to my mind were avoidable. So I explained what my views of the question were, and suggested to Lady Melodé that she should rest a few hours at the Grand and take the first train for Calais in the morning.

She would not hear of it, declaring that it would be madness for her to remain in Paris an hour longer than was absolutely necessary, and as I was in total ignorance of the motives which actuated her, I could not gainsay her.

"What course would you suggest?" I asked, before telling her of my own project.

"I have thought of nothing," she replied, "except that by good fortune you might manage to get me by means of your car to Boulogne in time to catch a boat in the morning."

"If you are still bent on leaving Paris and France by a route which is not likely to be anticipated by anyone, I have a suggestion to make," I said. "But at the same time I must warn you that the journey will probably be attended with a good deal of discomfort, and possibly some danger."

"There can be no discomfort I will not face gladly and no danger so great as that we shall leave behind," she answered.

"Really, I do not think M. le Comte d'Hautville is so much to be feared as you imagine," I contended.

"You know him?" she asked, and I noticed a movement as if she shrank from me.

"By reputation only. I have never met him," I replied.

"I wish I could see your face, Mr. Hardinge," she remarked.

"May I be permitted to smoke a cigarette?" I asked.

"Of course," she said.

I took a cigarette from my case and then I struck a match. "I have never met d'Hautville until to-night," I remarked, as I held the match before my face previous to lighting the cigarette.

She laughed by way of reply. Then she took my hand. "Forgive me for an unworthy suspicion, Mr. Hardinge; but if you knew what manner of man I have been fighting you would know that no

thought concerning him is too wild to find harbourage in my brain."

"I hit him pretty hard, you know. A confederate would hardly have treated him quite so severely," I remarked.

"Yes," she answered. "It was an absurd suspicion."

I suppose I must have squeezed her hand too hard at this moment, for she withdrew it from my grasp. I threw my cigarette out of the window.

"Are you not going to smoke after all?" she said.

"Rather too close quarters, isn't it?" I replied. "That cigarette has fulfilled its purpose if it has shown you that you may trust to me."

"I do trust in you. I trust in you absolutely," she murmured.

"Then now for my suggestion," I said.

"Yes." There was eagerness in her tone.

"What do you say to a night ride in my car to Havre, and thence, if the weather is propitious, a trip in my motor boat to Southampton?"

She answered with a little cry of delight.

"It will be beastly cold," I continued.

"There is nothing I should enjoy more, even if there were no occasion for the trip. Under present circumstances you cannot imagine how delightful your proposal sounds."

I saw a chance of sating my curiosity, and I took it. "I think if you were to confide to me what those

circumstances are, Lady Melodé, I might conceivably be of still more assistance to you."

My only answer was a sigh.

"I do not speak from idle curiosity," I urged. "I really should like to be able to help you."

"If I only could tell you everything," she began, and then paused.

"Why not? I shall not abuse your confidence," I said.

"No, don't ask me to do so, Mr. Hardinge," she answered. "Don't ask me to tell you anything, please!"

I could not withstand the pleading in her voice, though I fancy—nay, I know now—that I was foolish not to have pressed the question. If I had done so she would have told me things that would have saved me a good deal of mental torture and probably have enabled me to save her similar trouble. But in deference to her wish I desisted, and we were silent until the cab stopped. I jumped out, to find that the poor old horse in the shafts was completely foundered. Fortunately, we were now approaching the centre of the city, and, another vehicle coming along, we transferred ourselves to it, and were not long in arriving at our destination.

We did not enter the hotel, but made our way directly to the garage. The night attendant took a good deal of arousing, but when he made his appearance he recognised me, and made no difficulty

about getting my car out, though he was evidently greatly surprised at my desiring to take a drive at such an unearthly hour, for it was now close upon 3 A.M.

"M'sieu is not taking his chauffeur?" he remarked when he had lighted the lamps and thrown open the doors, preparatory to starting the engine.

I was glad of the reminder, for I had entirely forgotten the worthy Cole's existence. I borrowed a sheet of paper and an envelope, and scribbled a note to him, telling him that I had been called away for a couple of days, and asked the attendant to let him have the epistle first thing in the morning. While I was writing the man had brought me my overcoats, and then another difficulty confronted me. I realised that Lady Melodé was ill equipped for a rapid journey in an open car on a winter night. It is true she had a sable cloak which reached to her heels, but that alone would scarcely afford sufficient protection. I made her the offer of one of my coats, but she declared that her own cloak would be quite sufficient when seated in the tonneau, and upon my continuing to object she proposed that she should borrow my man's motor coat instead. He had left his belongings in the garage, so that there was no difficulty in carrying out the suggestion, and her slender figure was soon lost to sight in Cole's leather coat, her hair covered with Cole's leather cap, and her face completely disguised beneath Cole's gog-

gles. Thus accoutred, I tucked her up in a couple of rugs, and climbed into my seat. One other thing I had done. I had slipped a louis into the attendant's hand with the remark: "If enquiries are made, you have never seen madame. I have gone for an early drive alone."

He smiled as he pocketed the coin, and told me that he was sympathetically disposed toward persons engaged in—well, the sort of adventure he probably imagined that we were engaged in; so I said, "I shall be back in a couple of days, and I should like to hear whether any enquiries are made concerning me."

"Certainly, m'sieu," he replied. He started the engine, and we were off.

The boulevards were by no means deserted as we passed out of the garage, but there was very little traffic, and as soon as we turned into the Champs Elysées I let the car go, and we soon reached the barrier. There I submitted to the usual examination, and took my receipt for petrol from a very sleepy official. While we waited I noticed that my companion was looking behind, as if she expected pursuit, though she did not say a word. When once more I started the car I fancied I heard her sigh with relief.

The night was horribly dark once we had left the Paris lights behind, and I was glad that I had driven over the road before me at least half a dozen times

before. A fine snow had commenced to fall, and for some time I dared venture upon nothing higher than my second speed. Gradually, however, my eyes grew accustomed to the light, and once fairly on the Rouen road I let the car go again, and she began to eat the miles which lay between us and our destination. Luckily the snow was of microscopic fineness and perfectly hard. It was no more of a drawback than a film of dust on the road, and as we flew onward it was whirled up behind in a cloud which was more reminiscent of the road in midsummer than midwinter.

And what of the incidents of the journey? There were none, or at least my attention was so closely concentrated on the task that I had no time to take note of anything. I remember Gisors, and how peacefully the little town slumbered beneath its white mantle, for in passing through the gate of Normandy only the solitary bark of a dog answered the challenge of my horn. After that, an endless ribbon of white road, to see which I had every minute to brush the snow from my goggles, until we reached Rouen. My hands were so numbed by this time that it was with difficulty I could clutch the lever to reduce the speed as we passed through the town. I need not have troubled. Rouen was as deep in slumber as Gisors had been. Nothing barred the way, and leaving the town behind, I put on my highest speed to rush the hill which lay between us and Can-

telou. I had to drop to the lowest before I reached the top, for with fingers stiff with cold I found difficulty in adjusting the supply of petrol to the engine with any nicety. But the delay was momentary. At racing speed we darted downhill along the track which cut the black lines of the Foret de Roumere. The woodlands were behind us, and I remember how pleased I was to sight the beacon on the Seine flaming its signal to the river boats as we came to Duclair. Again the river was lost to sight, and again we plunged into forest land, but not for long. Caudebec slept like all the other towns on our route, and once again I had to slacken speed as we climbed to the top of the plateau which lies between Caudebec and Lillebonne. When Lillebonne lay behind there seemed to be a keener bite in the wind, which carried a taste of salt as it blew in from the sea. The road now was perfectly flat, and the white-robed meadows on my left hand faded away into the darkness of the estuary. Then suddenly there flashed from the horizon the twin lights which I knew could be none other than those of the Cap de Herie, and I knew that our journey was nearly done.

A little later came tram lines, and I slackened speed. Then houses, and, though the darkness was still upon the face of the earth, figures of men started up out of it, and after a momentary illumination, faded away again into the gloom from which they had emerged. And at last came the lighted streets

and the hotel at which on previous occasions I had stopped.

When I pulled up I lost no time in alighting, but when I reached the pavement I stood rocking to and fro like a drunken man. I was numbed through with the cold, and it was only by vigorous effort that I managed to restore any sort of circulation to my limbs. Then my next business was to see how my companion had fared. She had not moved when I stopped, and she was so still that it was with fear at my heart I stepped into the body of the car. She had drawn a rug over her shoulders and head, and the snow lay drifted on the covering. I drew it back from her face. I need not have feared. She opened her eyes and smiled. "Where am I?" she asked. It was the wonder wakening of a child.

"Havre," I answered. "Wake up to Havre and breakfast."

Presently we found ourselves in the salon of the hotel, which seemed to me colder than the air outside. Seven o'clock in the morning is perhaps the time when one finds the resources of a French hotel at their lowest ebb, and the sleepy porter who admitted us could afford us but little prospect of immediate relief. I persuaded him, however, to pilot me to a stable, where I housed the car, and then we left the inhospitable place behind us. I found my immediate requirements at a little baker's shop. There, seated at a little table, in an atmosphere which

was delightfully genial, we partook of coffee and rolls. The coffee was nectar, the rolls ambrosia, and I had a winter motor hunger, which is, I believe, the nearest thing to a wolf's appetite to which a mere man may attain. I know it surprised Lady Melodé, for she watched me with an amused smile for a long while after she had finished her own meal. She told me that, covering herself with the rug, she had fallen asleep immediately after leaving Rouen, and had felt nothing of the cold which had bitten me so hard.

Dawn had broken by the time our meal was finished, but minute particles of snow were still drifting on the breeze, and the prospect of crossing to Southampton in an open boat seemed so unpromising that I made a last attempt to dissuade my companion from venturing. But she would not hear of delay.

"Please, Mr. Hardinge, let us get away as soon as we can," she said. "I shall not feel safe until we are in England." Then, when I still hesitated, she flashed out: "Of course, if you are afraid——"

The taunt settled my wavering determination. We went out into the gray light of the morning toward the wharf where the Petrel awaited my orders. There was no one about, and a good hour elapsed before I found the wharfinger, and another passed before the tanks were filled with petrol and we could embark. The few people who were upon the quay

as we took our departure must have thought we were a pair of lunatics, for the snow was still falling, and a more unpromising day for an excursion by boat could scarcely be conceived. I had brought down all the rugs from the car, and with them I had made a snug nest aft for my passenger. She curled herself up in them, I took the wheel in my hand, and headed for the mouth of the harbour.

CHAPTER VII

ON A WINTER SEA

THE weather was much thicker than was desirable as I groped along the fairway, keeping my eyes open to their widest extent, for I had no wish to chuck my little craft bows on to the hull of some rotten old tramp which would not feel a tremor from a shock which would crumple up the Petrel and send her to the bottom. We got out all right, however, and the sky seemed a little brighter, though in a very few minutes we lost sight of the Cap de Herie in the drifting snow. The prospect was not a pretty one, and the more I considered it the less I liked it. The wind had dropped, and there was nothing visible but a leaden sea, canopied by leaden clouds from which the snowflakes dropped sullenly. The Petrel seemed to be the only thing moving on the waste, and I was in two minds about putting back until the weather cleared, chancing the scorn of my companion. I suppose it was a false sense of shame prevented me, for, glancing back at Lady Melodé, I saw that she had a most contented air. With a growl at my own folly, I put the engines at their

top speed, determining to put as great a distance as possible between myself and the starting point before the desire to return should overmaster me. My reward was swift. The exhilaration which is always attendant upon swift movement seized hold of me, and I had no thought of return. Gradually, too, the air cleared. The snow ceased to fall. The clouds lifted, and we had not been afloat for an hour before the rich red ball of a winter sun glowed at us through a high fog belt. Then came a puff or two of wind, and, helter skelter, the clouds took to flight, the fog wreaths were torn aside, and we were cutting a sapphire sea beneath a turquoise sky.

I began to enjoy the adventure. For the first time since leaving Paris I was able to devote some attention to my companion. The brisk air had brought the colour to her cheeks, and was tugging away at a stray tress of her hair which had escaped from beneath Cole's cap which she still wore.

"We are going to have a fine crossing, after all," I shouted encouragingly.

The wind took the words past her. She rose from her seat and made her way forward with a parcel which she had unearthed from beneath the rugs. "Are you not hungry?" she asked, when she came within speaking distance.

"I'm afraid I shall be famished before we get to Southampton," I replied, ruefully. "Coffee and rolls are not a very sustaining diet, are they? I did not

mean to starve you, Lady Melodé, but I entirely forgot to bring any provisions on board."

"How lucky I remembered woman's first duty to man!" she answered. "While you were so busy with the boat I made some sort of provision for our needs." She unwrapped the parcel and produced from it a long loaf and a substantial-looking galantine, some fruit, a large packet of chocolate, and a bottle of burgundy. "Now, if you can only manage to take the chill off the wine, I think we might have quite a pleasant lunch," she said.

"You have done your duty nobly, Lady Melodé," I answered, as I took the bottle from her hand and placed it alongside one of the cylinders of the engine.

"I do hope you have knives and forks aboard," she said, anxiously, "for that is where my forgetfulness began."

I laughed. "You will find an empty luncheon basket in the locker on the port quarter," I said.

"Which is the port quarter?" she asked, demurely. "I am not quite a sailorman yet, in spite of the—oilies do you call them?"

I could not but laugh again, as I directed her to the locker, for she presented a quaint picture. I had rigged her out in a suit of oilskins, which she had managed somehow to tuck her skirts into, so that progression was difficult. She merely made a little moué at me over her shoulder in reply to my laugh-

ter, and fished out the basket. She took the needful articles from inside and spread out the meal on the lid of the basket, and when she had finished she came again to my side, and touching her cap saucily, said: "Lunch is ready, sir."

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to feed me, Lady Melodé. One can hardly leave a motor boat to steer herself," I explained.

"How stupid of me," she replied, and I could see she was disappointed. Then, after a moment, she added: "Don't you think we have half an hour to spare? There would be no need to steer if the motor was not running, would there?"

I looked round with my most weather-wise air. "No," I answered. "There would be little risk in letting the boat drift under present conditions, and barring accidents we ought to be able to make Southampton by four o'clock this afternoon."

"Then stop the engine and come and eat," she commanded.

I was nothing loth to obey, and though I should have preferred to have kept the engines running, yet I considered it well to husband my petrol, and, stopping them, I let the boat drift and seated myself beside her.

That *al fresco* lunch was the most delightful meal I had ever partaken of. My appetite was excellent, for it was the hour of noon, and I had touched nothing since the rolls at eight. But it was not my appe-

tite which made for my enjoyment so much as the delightful personality of my companion. While we ate we talked. At least Lady Melodé talked and I listened. Until this moment I had only seen her under the stress of trouble. But those troubles she seemed to have left behind her on the quay at Havre. The first time I had heard her voice I had been fascinated by it, and in the half hour we spent over that meal my fascination was completed. Not by her voice alone, though it was of matchless timbre and tone; nor by the rippling melody of her laughter; but just as much by the bright spirit which animated speech and thought alike. But though she chattered freely, not once did she give a hint which would help me to elucidate any one of the things I wanted to know. She talked of motoring, of painting, of singing, of persons even, in an impersonal way which gave me not the slightest clue to her identity. There was a touch of imperiousness in her manner which told me that she was somebody, but nothing more.

I usually find that the best method of ascertaining what I want to know is to ask for the information point blank, and thus it was not long before I ventured to enquire from my companion whether she did not think that our acquaintance had progressed sufficiently far to warrant a formal introduction.

"But you know who I am," she replied. "I am Lady Melodé."

"I know that, it is true, but anybody who heard you speak would know as much."

"I should think that rank flattery if I had not heard it before," she said. "What more do you want to know?"

"I doubt not more than my desert," I answered. "But what man is ever satisfied with incomplete information when a woman really interests him?"

"It is a great thing to have interested Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge," she said, with pleasant mockery.

"I am glad you think so," I answered, "because you may then be disposed to complete my information concerning Lady Melodé."

She pondered awhile, then she shook her head. "Not yet," she murmured, more as if in reply to the questioning of her own brain than to my request. "Not yet; you must for the present be content to know me as Lady Melodé."

"Then it is not your real name?" I asked eagerly.

"You told me just now that it was so real that anybody would guess it from hearing me speak," she answered, roguishly.

"Why may I not know the rest of it?" I said, unheeding the prevarication.

Petulantly came the answer. "I cannot tell you." Then quickly, as if she feared that her petulance was ungracious, she continued earnestly: "Mr. Hardinge, you must try and find it in your heart to forgive me, but at present you must be content to be

thanked for all you have done for me by the unknown Lady Melodé. I know that I am indebted to you for far more than any woman has a right to expect from any man who has no claims upon her. I can never forget your kindness, but I cannot repay it."

"I want no repayment but the chance of seeing you again," I cried.

"Some day," she said, "but let me finish. You have believed in me, trusted me under circumstances which are enough to shake any man's faith in a woman, but never by word or look have you hurt me with a hint of suspicion."

"Those letters," I murmured.

A little laugh, coupled with "You did not really doubt my motives?" was her answer.

"I did," I answered stoutly.

"For just one brainy moment," she said, "when your emotional, chivalrous self was in momentary conflict with your intelligence, you may have thought that you mistrusted me, but you did not do so in reality, or I should never have been here now."

This analysis of the thought which had inspired my actions took me aback. She was right, and I began to feel a very real respect for the intelligence which could deduce so clearly from limited observation.

"Why you should have trusted me so fully, I do not know," she continued, though as she spoke she

dropped her eyes, possibly lest she should read the reason in mine.

"The reason——" I began.

She stopped me hastily. "I will not ask it. It is enough that you did so, and now I am going to ask you to be equally chivalrous to the end. I know that you could easily find out all about me. You have but to whisper of your adventure—but that I am sure you will not do. But I want you to forget the past two days."

"That were impossible," I said.

"Fate may bring us together again some day," she went on, as if she had not heard my remark. "If so, I shall expect that you will meet me as a complete stranger."

She looked at me so earnestly and gratefully that I had nothing to say. What could I have said? She held out her hand to me and I raised it to my lips. Then turning away, I busied myself at starting the motor.

Lady Melodé came and stood at my side at the wheel when once again I had got the Petrel on her course. She was desirous of learning the management of the boat, and, under my tuition, she soon picked up the trick of steering. This gave me an opportunity to smoke a cigarette under shelter of the hood, and so for a couple of hours we progressed, taking spell and spell at the wheel, and talking the while. I learned a good deal of my fair companion's

tastes during this time and revealed still more of my own. When a beautiful woman, even though she be clad in oilskins, with a chauffeur's cap covering her tresses, betrays an interest in a man's likes and dislikes, in his hopes and his ambitions, he is not likely to prove unresponsive, and I have a suspicion that I made a fairly complete revelation of myself before I observed that she was getting weary. I challenged her with being tired, but at first she would not admit it; but when twice in thirty seconds she let the Petrel drop a couple of points off her course, she confessed that she could hardly keep her eyes open. So I let the engine run free while I tucked her up amongst the rugs in the stern, and then went back to the wheel.

I was beginning to feel confoundedly sleepy myself, but I fought the impulse, solacing myself with the thought that in two or three more hours at the outside I should be able to indulge my desire to the fullest extent. Meanwhile the wind had been freshening from the northeast ever since noon, and the sky had again become overcast. The sea was getting up, too, and the waves were big enough to produce a perceptible shock as the Petrel thrust her bow into them.

After another hour the wind had freshened considerably. The spray was flying in a continuous shower, and a casual snowflake or two gave me anxious thoughts. I began to wonder how long I should

be able to keep the Petrel at full speed, and to look ahead longingly for a glimpse of the Isle of Wight. By this time, too, I began to feel horribly chilled. The continuous stream of water to which I was exposed found its way through my oilskins, running down my neck in a stream, until I had scarcely a dry thread on me.

Another hour slipped by slowly. Lady Melodé slept as soundly as if rocked in a cradle. I was regretting the half hour we had taken over lunch, for never a glimpse of land rewarded my look-out. I feared lest I had miscalculated the drift of the tide, or by some error or another steered a wrong course. Earlier in the day we had sighted plenty of shipping, but now nothing at all was visible through the snow which began to drive thickly on the wind. The sea was not a heavy one for a vessel of any size, but for a half-decked racing motor boat it was quite big enough to provide material for apprehension. It occurred to me that an unexpected end to our adventure might come at any moment, particularly when a sudden squall beat down upon us and enveloped the little Petrel in a smother of foam and snow. I came through it blind to everything for a moment, uncertain whether I was on or under the water, and ran plump into another danger; for as I rubbed the salt water out of my eyes I became aware that I was heading bow on to a huge liner about a chain's length distant. I got the Petrel round with a dozen yards

to spare, but the imminence of the danger acted as a spur to my flagging faculties. After all, we had escaped, and the danger into which we had so nearly run was to prove a blessing in disguise. The steamship might have passed us in the squall, and I should have been left to blunder on in the swiftly gathering darkness. As it happened, I recognised her for a Castle liner dropping down to Southampton, outward bound from the port of London, and I knew then whereabouts we were. My course was that of the ship, and acting on the knowledge I had gained I was soon in the more sheltered Southampton water, though full night had fallen before I picked up my moorings and prepared to land. Then I went aft and bent over my passenger. She was fast asleep still.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNEXPECTED FAREWELL

When I saw my passenger sleeping so cosily amongst the rugs, instead of being pleased that she had so been enabled to escape the discomforts of the trip, my feeling was one of annoyance. Of course, I had no right to be annoyed. I suppose my vanity was injured by the knowledge that I should get no recognition of the way I had brought the Petrel through the very real perils of the passage. I did not make any allowance for the effects of the fresh air and exposure; besides, I was so numbed with the cold that my hands were as useless as two pieces of board, I had not a dry thread of clothing upon me, and, as I moved, my shoes squelched with the water inside them. I felt chilled to the marrow, and my teeth chattered in spite of all my efforts to keep them together. Then, too, for a couple of hours past all my faculties had been strained to their utmost, and the reaction was considerable. Under these circumstances, my state of mind may be explainable, though I do not venture to apologise for it. It is a pitiful confession of weakness, but this is a true

record of fact, and that is precisely how I felt when I drew the rug back from Lady Melodé's face and saw that she was blissfully unconscious that we had come safe to port.

I am glad that my ill temper did not endure until she was fully awakened. It was, in fact, the roughness of my tone as I bade her awaken that brought me to a knowledge of my evil frame of mind, and by the time she had risen to a sitting position and had rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, I was sufficiently master of myself to be ashamed of the feelings which had got hold of me.

"Where are we?" were her first words.

"Southampton," was my brief reply. "Thank heaven, we have managed to get here!"

"Why, I must have slept for hours!" she said. "How perfectly horrid of me!"

The self-reproach in her voice put to flight the remnant of my ill-conditioned thoughts.

"Quite the best thing you could have done," I answered. "There was very little enjoyment to have been got out of the last few hours."

"Why?" she asked, wonderingly.

"I'll tell you why when we are ashore," I answered, as I steadied the boat against the quay side for her to disembark.

She scrambled ashore with difficulty owing to the encumbrance of the oilskins, and after pitching a

couple of the rugs ashore I followed and made the painter fast.

"Now the next thing is a hotel and dry clothes and dinner, I suppose," I said.

"Do you know anything about the London trains?" she asked.

"But surely you cannot contemplate going any further to-night?" I said in astonishment.

"I must be in town to-night, if possible," she answered.

"But——" I began.

"I cannot listen," she said, and turned as if to depart.

"You can hardly go to town in those oilies," I suggested.

She laughed, just one little trill, and disencumbered herself of the unprepossessing garments, rolling them into a little bundle. She doffed the leather jacket also, and replaced the chauffeur's cap with her own toque, and in a minute was a very different being to the companion who had lunched with me in mid-channel. I also got rid of my waterproofings and pitched them into the boat. We were quite alone on the deserted quay, and once again the snow began to fall.

"Now what about the trains?" she said, as we turned our faces toward the town.

"Have you any idea as to the time?" I asked.

She looked at the little jewelled watch on her wrist. "It is now a little after five," she answered.

"If you are really in a hurry we might catch the 5.58. It would bring us up to town inside of two hours," I remarked.

"Will take *me* up to town," she said. "You have your boat to look after, and I am sure you will need some food and rest before travelling any further."

"Hang the boat!" I replied. "I have taken charge of you so far. Haven't I earned the right to see you safely to your journey's end?"

"Would it be any advantage to you to bid me good-bye on the Waterloo rather than on the Southampton platform? Further than that you could not accompany me."

"All the advantage in the world. I should have two hours more of your company," I answered, eagerly, for the nearness of the farewell bade fair to scatter my few remaining senses.

The answer was what I might have expected. "I shall bid you good-bye at Southampton, Mr. Hardinge."

"Oh, well, I shall not force my company upon you," I replied savagely. My ill temper had once more got the upper hand, and we passed through the lighted streets without a word. I was sorry for my churlishness long before we reached the station, and I am glad that I had the grace to apolo-

gise. I suppose she realised that I was very nearly done up, for she forgave me my ill-mannered speech on the instant.

There were ten minutes to spare when we reached the station, and I utilised the time to do all possible to make her journey comfortable, not forgetting a tea basket supplemented with some sandwiches, and a tip to the guard to ensure that her privacy would not be disturbed. Then there was nothing left but to make my adieu.

"You are still determined upon dismissing me here?" I asked at the carriage door.

"I think it is best," she answered. "Best for both of us," and she held out her hand.

I took her little palm in mine, and she gave a cry of dismay. "You feel like a block of ice!" she cried. Then I suppose some of the moisture from my sleeve must have trickled upon her hand, for she passed it hastily over my coat. "Why, you are soaking wet! How did you manage to get in such a state?"

"It is impossible to avoid getting wet when there is any sea on, and the weather was a trifle dirty for the last couple of hours," I explained.

"You must think me an awful brute. I—I was asleep the whole of the time, and had not the slightest idea." The evident distress on her face was ample compensation for all I had undergone. I thought so then, and I think so still. "I should never forgive myself if you were to be ill in conse-

quence. Promise me," she added, "that you will get a hot bath immediately you leave me, really hot, mind, and go straight to bed."

I was too shivery to laugh, or I should have done so. "You need not worry," I said. "It is not the first time I have been in a similar plight without experiencing any ill effects."

"You will promise me?" she urged.

"I shall be in a Turkish bath within ten minutes of the departure of this train," I answered.

Then the guard's whistle shrilled and the train began to move. I had imagined a sentimental leave-taking, and the farewell had merely provided a bathetic ending to my romance in the form of a recommendation to take a bath. No, it had not ended there. As I stood gazing stupidly at the moving train, Lady Melodé came to the window of the compartment. A handkerchief fluttered in her hand for a moment, then rolling it into a tiny ball she threw it toward me before the carriage had cleared the platform. There were not half a dozen people gathered there to see friends off, and nobody but an elderly porter paid any attention to me as I picked up the souvenir. He merely smiled and touched his hat as I passed him on my way to the exit, and I was so full of delight that I stopped and tipped him half a crown.

I had placed the little square of cambric and lace in my pocket, but no sooner was I in the street than

I took it out again and lifted it to my lips. Sentimental idiot, I hear people say. Perhaps, but after all the sentimental moments of life are not the least delightful. However, I am not going to moralise on the subject. Indeed, I should not have referred to the episode at all but for the fact that as I raised the handkerchief to my lips I detected something hard wrapped within. I stopped under the first lamp and, unrolling the cambric, I found a ring secured by a hastily tied knot in one corner. I turned the trinket over in my hand curiously, for it was a unique piece of work, and I judged it to be of some value apart from its associations. It was shaped like a snake, with the head thrown back over the coils, of which there were half a dozen, and the open mouth held a curiously cut diamond. I did not know then that the stone was a diamond, and I should have been just as pleased if the egg-shaped stone held in the open jaws had been a piece of glass. What did please me about the souvenir was the fact that the coils were all open ones, and so elastic that, although at first sight the ring seemed far too small, by the exertion of a little pressure they widened sufficiently to allow of its passing the knuckle of my little finger.

The rest of my doings that evening are of no particular interest. I hunted up the man who on former occasions had taken charge of the Petrel, and made arrangements for the housing of my boat. Af-

terward I found a Turkish bath, where I warmed myself while my clothes were dried, and also partook of an indifferent meal. Then, finding I should be able to catch the last train, and having nothing to keep me in Southampton, I hastened to the station and took a ticket to Waterloo. I fell asleep directly I was settled in my corner, and did not awaken until a ticket collector had me by the collar and shook me into consciousness. After that I just managed to keep awake until I reached my chambers in Ryder Street, though I retain but a very phantasmagoric recollection of my ride through London. I just remember that the streets were all white, that there was very little traffic about, and that my bedroom was confoundedly cold.

I was warm enough when I awoke the next morning, if it is permissible to call three o'clock in the afternoon morning. But a long while elapsed before I could disentangle my sleeping and waking recollections, and it was only the materialistic evidence of the ring on my finger which ultimately convinced me that the experiences of the preceding two days had not been gathered in dreamland. Once satisfied on the point, I got up and found that I was none the worse for the adventures in question. I was furiously hungry, but I contented myself with a fairly substantial breakfast or afternoon tea, intending to dine later at the club.

Then I sat down to consider the situation. I con-

sumed ten cigarettes without any result other than the drafting and dispatching of a telegram to Coles telling him that I should return to Paris the next day. I was not sure that my decision was a wise one, for I knew that I should in all probability be called upon by d'Hautville for satisfaction for the affront I had put upon him. But I did not see very well how I could shirk my responsibility, and the thought did occur to me that it was only through some such encounter that I might be able to gain some further knowledge of the identity of Lady Melodé without breaking my promise to make no enquiries. Having arrived at the decision to return, I left my rooms and despatched the wire myself on the way to the club.

London was in the state of filth peculiar to it when recovering from the effects of a heavy snowfall, and the club was almost deserted when I arrived there. Not that solitude mattered to me. The companionship of my own thoughts was quite sufficient in view of a message which I found awaiting me. As I entered, the hall porter handed me a pile of letters which had accumulated in my absence, and I carried them with me into the smoking-room to open at my leisure. The first dozen or so were merely the usual formal Christmas greeting cards, and they went into the fire one after another. Then came a letter in a handwriting which was unknown to me, beginning "Dear Mr. Hardinge," and turning to the end

to see who was my correspondent, I could hardly believe my eyes when I read the signature "Melodé."

I have that letter still, and I treasure it amongst the most valued of my possessions, for it was the first I ever received from one who was to become very dear to me. It is not the only letter in the same bold, clear hand which is in my possession, but on the majority of them no eye but my own shall ever rest; but this one contains nothing which no stranger might not read, and as it was to influence my conduct in the near future, I set it down here in full.

"Dear Mr. Hardinge," I read, "I suppose you must be aware what a mixed bundle of contradictions goes to the making of a woman in addition to the usual rag and a bone and a bundle of hair, and so you may understand why, after bidding you forget me, I at the moment of parting threw you a little souvenir to remember me by. No, I am not going to ask you to send it back to me. I hope you will wear that little Indian ring, and that good fortune will go with it. I am sure that you will not part with it when I tell you that it is a talisman of no mean repute. Given with the good-will of the giver, it bestows wisdom and courage and safety from sudden death. Of course, the two former gifts have been anticipated by nature in your case, but the last is not in the gift of nature, is it? Need I say that

it is with the good-will of the late owner that it comes into your possession? Of course, you will not believe in these talismanic virtues. I do not myself; but do you not think that the ingrained superstition in all of us sometimes responds to the suggestion of occult influence with the happiest results? So if you are ever in any difficult position, remember the talisman you wear. You will wear it, will you not?"

"Of course, I will wear it," I muttered. "It shall never leave my finger."

"One word more. Whatever impression you may have formed of me, please do not think me either ungrateful or selfish. I know it must be hard for you to come to any other conclusion, seeing how I made use of you for the furtherance of my own plans, but I think if you knew how I am situated you would find it in your heart to forgive me. It may be that fate will permit of our meeting again some day, and if so, I hope it may be kinder as to the circumstances than on the recent occasion. In all trust and confidence, let me still remain,

"Yours very gratefully,

"MELODÉ."

There was no address to the letter, and the envelope merely bore the postmark of the Southwestern

London district. I read it a dozen times, I should think, and then I went to the dining-room. The place was empty save for a little party of four at one end of the room. I was not sorry; in fact, I felt aggrieved when another man who entered after me made his way to my table, and, with a word to ask if I had any objection, seated himself opposite me.

At any other time I should have been glad of the companionship of the man who had joined me, for from the first time I had met him I had liked him, a liking tempered by curiosity. This curiosity was shared by everyone else in the club, but inasmuch as Meredith Mervyn was to play a part in the development of my adventure, I may perhaps be permitted to describe him with some detail.

CHAPTER IX

THE HISTORY OF A RING

MERRY MERVYN, as he was known to his intimates, partly because of his name, but chiefly because even the ghost of a smile was never permitted to disturb the serenity of his features, was one of a type that every clubman knows. Everyone knew vaguely what he had been, but no one knew precisely what he did, where he lived, and what were his means of subsistence. He had been in the Indian Civil Service, but why he had left no one knew or cared. Punctually at ten o'clock every morning he would be seen entering the club doors, dropping apparently from nowhere. Once within the doors, he would hang up his hat and coat and betake himself to the dining-room, where his breakfast would be awaiting him at the corner table he always occupied. Usually he remained at the club until five in the afternoon, when he would disappear for a couple of hours, to return about seven, dressed for dinner. Then he would be seen in the smoking, billiard, or card rooms, and finally, when the lights were beginning to be turned off, he would disappear through

the door as completely as if the night had swallowed him. Without occupation of any kind, without even a hobby, the club seemed to fill his existence.

He was popular in a negative kind of way. He played a decent game of billiards and a really good game of bridge. Though he did not talk much himself, he was an excellent listener, and when he did make a remark it was usually couched in a sub-acid vein of cynicism which suited his mirthless countenance. I had often remarked upon this gravity of his, wondering whether it was a carefully cultivated pose, since I knew that he was not deficient of a sense of humour. It seemed unnatural that a man who was certainly under forty should never be stirred to kindly laughter. Besides, the cast of his countenance would have led no one to suppose that he was congenitally deprived of the power to laugh. His brow was open, his eyes met one frankly, and were of the good-humoured blue-grey type, while his mouth did not turn down at the corners, nor was it of the thin-lipped variety. For the rest, he was fair-haired, clean-shaven, and possessed of a well-built figure; and when I say that he stood about five feet ten in his boots, you can form a pretty good idea of what he was like.

Such was the man who placed himself opposite me, and on any other occasion I should have been delighted with his company; but on this evening my head was so full of my own affairs that I fear I was

a little curt in my replies to his efforts at making conversation, for by the end of my dinner he was as silent as myself. I think I had even forgotten his presence when I was suddenly awakened to it again. I had taken up a pear to peel when I became conscious that his eyes were fixedly regarding the ring I wore, and immediately afterward he remarked quietly: "Excuse me, Mr. Hardinge, but will you allow me to look more closely at your ring?"

I was annoyed at the request, and was about to retort rather rudely, when he continued hastily: "It is not idle curiosity which prompts me to ask, and I shall be pleased to explain my reasons if you wish me to do so."

He spoke so earnestly that my curiosity was aroused in turn. "It is a unique piece of work, is it not?" I asked, as I held my hand across the table.

"It is a unique piece of work," he repeated, quietly. "There can hardly be two like it in existence."

"I hardly see why there should not," I answered.

"I can soon make certain," he said.

"Indeed?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied. "Allow me." He took my hand and, laying it flat upon the table, pressed upon the back of the snake head with his nail. To my surprise the jaw opened, revealing a hollow in the stone over which the jaw had closed like a lid.

"By Jove!" I said. "It is evident you know more

about this ring than I do. I had not the slightest idea that it contained any mechanism."

Mervyn regarded me so intently that I began to feel vaguely uneasy. "I ought to know more about it than you," he answered, after a while. "That ring was once mine."

I gazed at him in blank astonishment.

"It was once mine," he repeated, "and I cannot comprehend how it has come into your possession."

There was enquiry in his voice which at the moment I was not inclined to gratify. I merely remarked with a laugh: "Quite honestly, I can assure you. It was given to me as a keepsake, and with the assurance that it had talismanic virtues for the protection of the wearer."

Again he scrutinised me with a most disconcerting intentness. Then he rose from the table. "Look here, Hardinge," he said. "Come into the smoking-room for your coffee. We can easily find a quiet corner to-night, and I will tell you the history of that ring. Whether, after I have done so, you will confide to me particulars of how it came into your possession I will leave entirely to you, though I don't mind admitting that I should like to know."

I followed him into the smoking-room. It was as deserted as the dining-room had been. We wheeled a couple of chairs within a comfortable distance of the fire, and when our coffee had been brought, with liqueurs of the famous '46 brandy for

which the club is famous, we lighted our cigars and I settled down to listen.

I had thought that Mervyn had exhibited signs of excitement when he had identified the ring, but when he began to speak, nothing of the sort was apparent in his tone, though, as he had placed his seat so that the light was behind him, I could not see whether there was any change in the habitual calm of his face.

"The story of that ring," he commenced, "is like most stories where men and women are concerned—a story of folly. In this case mine was the folly, and if I ask you to keep the story to yourself it is for the simple reason that I prefer, like the average fool, not to publish my folly broadcast."

I could not help asking why, under these circumstances, he had suggested confiding the story to me.

He flicked the ash from the end of his cigar before he answered, coolly: "I have not analysed the reason. I spoke upon impulse. To-morrow I may possibly regret the impulse, and yet—well, when you have heard what I have to tell you, you may be able to understand that on occasion a cynical sojourner in clubland may at times be capable of labelling himself fool if by so doing he may prevent another man buying his experience at too high a rate."

"I do not see——" I began.

"Hear me out," he said, and I was silent. "When I wore that ring," he continued, "I must have been

just about your age at the present day. I was just as eager to enjoy life as yourself, just as enthusiastic in sport, and now my dinner, my game of bridge, and my bed, are my main interests in life."

"Oh, nonsense!" I interjected. "You are young still."

"I am forty," he answered, quietly, "but to all intents and purposes I have finished with life. One cannot pretend to enjoy the wine of life when one's palate is gone."

"I do not think one can lose one's palate at forty," I replied.

"You shall judge," replied he, grimly. "But let me return to the ring. You probably have guessed that it is Indian work, and if so, your guess would be right. It was presented to me by a rajah in return for a political service which I rendered him, or which he thought was due to my influence, some fifteen years ago. What its previous history had been I knew not. He set great store by it, and told me that it possessed all sorts of magic virtues, though so far as I could see the object for which it had been fashioned had been to contain enough poison in the cavity to enable the owner to commit suicide in an emergency. Well, I took the thing, and I wore it for four or five years, and truly my luck was so great that I became almost superstitious concerning the ring. In those days I was in the Indian Civil. I had no particular influence to back me, but after I

put that trinket on my finger I had the devil's own luck. My work brought me into contact with the heads of departments, and what with deaths and retirements I found myself eventually installed at Government House in a confidential post, in personal touch with the Viceroy, and looking forward confidently to a career. I was not allowing for one factor. I did not allow for the woman. You see, there was nothing unique about my folly. I fell in love."

I began to object. He silenced me with a gesture.

"It was at Simla, ten years ago last June. I met a girl there who appeared to be everything that all the poets and romancists have described as delightful in womanhood. I saw in her truth, honour, purity. What she really possessed was a dower of beauty, a charming manner, and a most fascinating voice."

I started so violently that Mervyn could not have failed to observe my agitation.

"If ever you hear that voice, be careful," he observed, drily. "I only wish I had been deaf to it. The owner was the daughter of a high-placed official, and she had come out to see her father after her first season. Naturally, she was the centre of a big crowd, and you can imagine my delight when she betrayed a preference for my society. She might have looked higher, but my reputation at that time was high, and her father did not disapprove. Then

fate played me a scurvy trick. She accepted an invitation to stay at Government House while her father went up country on a shooting expedition. Of course, I was delighted. I saw her every day, and we became engaged. The ring you are wearing was the pledge of our betrothal."

He sat in silence for a minute, glowering into the fire, and I forbore to interrupt his thoughts.

"There is something in the atmosphere of Simla," he continued, shortly, "which makes men mad where women are concerned. Take my case. If you look up the Civil list at the time, you will see that the berth I occupied was a supremely confidential one. Now, just then, certain proposals were in the air for the ratification of a treaty between H. M. Government and the Ameer. Naturally, it was of the first importance that no hint of these proposals should reach the Great Enemy in the North. Nobody but the confidential emissary of the Afghan ruler knew what was in the wind save my chief and myself. Yet I told my fiancée everything. I trusted her so implicitly that it never even occurred to me that I was betraying any confidence in doing so. To me it was merely as if I had talked to myself."

Again he was silent so long that I ventured to throw out a suggestion which I guessed might save him from the pain of concluding the narrative, for I knew that he must feel deeply on the subject. "And she babbled?" I hazarded.

"Babbled?" He laughed scornfully. The laugh was not a pleasant one. "Babbled? You will see that my folly was greater than that of merely trusting to an ordinary woman's keeping silence where a secret is concerned. But I will not anticipate. Her father returned from his shooting expedition. Our engagement was announced, and though I pressed for an early wedding she insisted that it should take place in England, and as my leave was due the following year, it was arranged that she should return home at once and that I should follow six months later. She went, and I remained in my fool's paradise for just about a month. My awakening was rapid. It commenced in a manner totally unexpected, by a communication from the Ameer breaking off all negotiations. When our agents at Cabul set to work to find out the reason, my chief was informed that our dear friend and ally had come to the conclusion that the English had played him false by revealing his proposals to the Russians. Though amazed, I did not connect the revelation with my fiancée. Then came a telegram from her stating that she had left the boat at Trieste. Though wondering at the reason, I did not connect the two incidents. A little later I received a letter in response to my enquiries stating that she had left the boat in company with another passenger. I was maddened by the latter intelligence as well as utterly bewildered. Then from one source and another items of

information came to hand which opened my eyes completely. The man with whom she had left the boat was no new acquaintance. His name had been coupled with hers to such an extent during her first London season that her chaperone—I forgot to mention that she was motherless—had thought it advisable to send her out to India to her father. You see, the man was not considered, even though he was figuring as a French count, to be a desirable parti. There was a suspicion that he was in the pay of the Russian secret service, a suspicion which was correct. Under an assumed name he had been a passenger on the same boat by which she had come out. He had sailed for Europe by the boat on which she had returned. It was easy for me to understand why I had been fooled. A pleasant story, is it not?" He laughed again.

"And that is all?" I asked lamely. He was not the sort of man with whom one would venture to commiserate.

"Not quite," he replied calmly. "I went to my chief and told him everything. He seemed sorry for me, and he even asked me to reconsider the resignation which I tendered at the same time. He knew more than a little about men, and was disposed to think that after my experience I should be worth more than another who had his lesson to learn. But I convinced him that it was my duty to seek out the man who had beaten us. I resigned, and set out

for England. I am not going to worry you with the details of my search. I found my man, and I recognised him by means of the ring. Chance brought him opposite me in a Paris restaurant, and even as I did to-night I recognised the ring instantly. I did not take long to broach my business. Indeed, he himself supplied me with the opportunity. Noticing the direction of my glance, he remarked: 'You seem interested in my ring, m'sieu?'

"'I seem to have seen it before,' I answered.

"He looked at me with sudden interest, and I suppose my appearance must have been described to him, for comprehension rushed into his eyes.

"'It is not impossible, m'sieu,' he answered, nonchalantly, 'though I wear it as a gage d'amour. A very charming countrywoman of yours presented it to me.'

"'Your wife?' I asked, for I had not learned all then.

"'But think, m'sieu,' he said. 'I am a man of the world like yourself. What should we do with wives?'

"'If man of the world is the polite way of describing a mouchard, a liar, and a thief, you have a just claim to the title,' I replied, with a distinctness which brought a hush upon every table near the one at which we were seated.

"My attack left him for a moment speechless. Then, half smiling, he waved his hand deprecatingly

to a waiter who had come forward. 'M'sieu has taken too much wine,' he remarked.

" 'Permit me to offer you at least one glass,' I retorted, as I poured out a glassful and sent it full in his face."

"Good!" I remarked.

"Hardly," replied Mervyn. "We met next morning. He had chosen swords, and he left me with three holes in my anatomy which kept me on my back for three months. As I asked you before, can you imagine a more illuminating story of folly if you tried?"

What could I say? I merely rose and held out my hand. He looked at me whimsically for a moment, then he gripped it tightly as he remarked: "I think I may trust you as a friend not to give me away, Hardinge."

CHAPTER X

A RECOGNITION AT THE MORGUE

After our mutual declaration of friendship I had less hesitation in asking Mervyn for fuller details of the story he had told me than I should otherwise have done, with the consequence that, before we parted, my brain was awhirl with conflicting doubts. He described the girl who had so shamelessly betrayed him, and in set words he painted a picture of Lady Melodé. He sketched an accurate portrait of d'Hautville when giving me a description of his successful rival. The girl's name alone was different. The name of the girl who had wrecked his life had been Temple—Molly Temple; but, as he said, and I could not help agreeing, "A name may be thrown aside as easily as a worn-out glove."

Yet despite the evidence of identification, backed up by the evidence of the ring, I could not bring myself to the belief that my Lady Melodé was one with the abandoned creature Mervyn had depicted. Long after I parted from him I sat looking into the fire with a great dread upon me, lest my doubts should

become certainties, and it was only when I realised that any amount of brooding over the matter would lead to no conclusion that I turned in.

The next morning I set off to Paris again. I had not given Mervyn the details of my adventure, though I had it in my mind to do so when I returned again to London. My journey was quite without incident, and so far as I could gather from the enquiries I made at the Grand, my absence had not been the occasion of any notice. I packed Coles off to Havre straightway to bring back my car, while remaining myself in Paris in order to give d'Hautville a chance, if he so desired, of asking the usual explanation.

It was dull work. I hated mooning helplessly about waiting for something or other to transpire, and in the hope that I might meet d'Hautville and give him a chance to bring matters to a climax I spent the greater part of the day after my arrival at the Automobile Club. But he did not put in an appearance, and when evening arrived the fancy occurred to me to traverse once more the ground I had passed over on Christmas night. So I sat for an hour outside the Café la Paix, but d'Hautville did not take a seat at my table. I dined at the same restaurant, I visited the Quatz' Arts, but no one took the slightest notice of me. I hired a cab and was driven to the Quai d'Auteuil, but the door by which I had entered was shut fast and the whole house

might have been empty, for not a light was visible on any floor. I was tired out by the time I reached my hotel, and, disgusted beyond measure at my own folly, I went to bed.

The next day was bitterly cold, with occasional snow showers, but I was far too restless to remain indoors, and I wandered about the streets, careless whither my footsteps carried me. It was thus I came eventually to the Morgue, and out of mere idle curiosity I entered.

The place was unusually empty. The usual throng gathered there to sate their morbid taste for the gruesome was absent, though three slabs behind the glass were occupied. As I entered, two or three people, a plump dame from the market, a gamin of ten or thereabouts and a youth of twenty of the Apache type passed out and I went straight towards the exit, feeling as if there were an extra chill in the atmosphere and muttering a curse at my foolishness in entering. Still my eyes turned instinctively to the silent figures awaiting recognition, and when my glance fell on the third I paused.

Surely the face of the third figure was familiar. Where had I seen it? The face of a girl, slightly distorted as if fear had of a sudden gripped her and death followed so swiftly that the expression had frozen there. Then as I stood and gazed there came back to me the memory of Christmas night. I sat again amongst the crowded audience at the Quatz'

Arts. The door opened. A surprised voice exclaimed, "Eh! Bon jour, m'sieu." I heard again the chorus of greeting, and I knew where I had seen that face before, for it was the face of the girl who had entered and drawn back, and later had entered again and thrown her arms around my neck. It was those arms lying so stiffly thrust out which had embraced me. It was those pallid lips which had lured me to the house on the Quai d'Auteuil. Distorted though it was by fear, changed with the touch of death, I recognised the face as the face of Lucille beyond the possibility of doubt.

With realisation of the fact I, too—I think, for the first time in my life—learned what fear is. I learned what it is to be robbed of all power of volition, to feel my heart beating in my throat. A mist swept across my eyes, and only by gripping at the rail in front of the glass, did I prevent myself from falling. A cold dew burst out upon my skin and I felt unutterably sick. I had sense enough left me to know that I must get away from the place, and I staggered rather than walked to the exit.

It was good to breathe the fresh pure air outside that charnel-house, and as I opened my lungs to it my senses came back to me. Then I turned and walked away. I walked quickly, but not fast enough to escape the spectral face of the dead girl. By a vivid flash of intuition I knew that again I had stumbled by chance upon another link of the mysteri-

ous chain of events which had twined about me. I had no reason then for coming to such a conclusion, but I had not long to wait before I had a very good reason for doing so. After walking rapidly for a few minutes, vainly striving to arrange my thoughts, I found myself under the shadow of Notre Dame, and the idea, whimsical enough to ensure my acting upon it in my then frame of mind, that if I could only get away, and be alone away from the people and the streets, my thoughts would range themselves, possessed itself of me. Notre Dame supplied the means even as it had suggested the idea, and I entered the little door in the tower in haste to ascend to the top. The custodian must have thought me madder than the average Englishman as he took my fee, but he was too polite to say what he evidently thought, and I commenced the ascent.

I began to regret my idea by the time I was half way to the top of the tower, for I fancied I heard footsteps keeping pace with mine up the dark staircase, pausing when I paused and coming on again when I went on. I attributed the footsteps to my excited imagination and, persisting in the ascent, came at length to the platform where the devils in their caps of snow looked out upon the city. I, too, looked down on the maze of roofs, and for the moment forgot my harassing thoughts in the spectacle of beauty presented to me. The clouds had cleared and the wintry sun, already nearing the hori-

zon, glowed redly upon the fair prospect of snowy pinnacles and roofs. Surely Paris had never seemed so pure and fair to mortal eye before. Underneath that veil——

My thoughts were not long to be diverted from the underlying world by the fair veil which covered it. Again I seemed to hear the sound of advancing footsteps. Determined not to be tricked by my imagination, I refused to turn my head even when they seemed to have reached the platform on which I stood. But it was no trick of my imagination. A mocking voice not a yard from me exclaimed, "Eh! Bon jour, m'sieu."

Luckily for me there was a balustrade between myself and the abyss, or the start I gave would have sent me whirling downwards. I would ask any of my readers to imagine themselves in my place, and ask them how they would have felt when they heard the words which had been ringing in my brain from the moment I had recognised the body of Lucille lying in the Morgue, veritably spoken in their ear. I know it sent all my remaining self-control to the winds.

My involuntary movement made me wheel round and brought me face to face with the speaker.

It was d'Hautville. I recognised him instantly. Not a yard separated me from the man whose unknown plans I had thwarted, the man whose machinations had produced such a disastrous effect on

Mervyn's life. With the realisation, however, that it was no spectral body with whom I had to deal, but with a living adversary, who had been at my heels during my ascent to the roof, my courage returned, though no words came from my lips with which to return the mocking greeting.

D'Hautville noted my silence, and he repeated the salutation with additional emphasis. I still remained silent, and he continued:

"You are not pleased to see me, m'sieu, or is it that the words awaken unpleasant memories?"

"The greeting, since I have heard it from your lips, will always awaken unpleasant memories, M. le Comte," I retorted sourly.

He laughed. "You flatter me. Yet I guess that the words sound not so sweetly from my lips as from the lips of any one of m'sieu's thousand admirers. These simple words haunt one at times, is it not so?"

Was he the fiend himself that he could be so well aware of all that had been passing in my brain? The words were spoken lightly, but with an intention I could not fail to perceive. A wonder as to his object in following me began to take possession of me. He would hardly have dogged my footsteps to this lonely spot in order to call me to account for the blow I had dealt him. At any rate, if such was his object, he made no attempt to achieve it. He leaned easily against a buttress, looking at me intently. Even so I regarded him, and I saw the marks of my

handiwork plainly visible in his face, though evident efforts had been made to hide them with cosmetiques.

"If you have any message for me I am ready to hear it," I said, after I had scrutinised him carefully awhile, "though I should have expected to receive the message through some friend of M. le Comte's."

He shrugged his shoulders. "If you are in so great a hurry to make an end of life there is an open door and an easy road." He waved his hand towards the gulf at my feet.

"I should not take that path even if I were to persuade you to tread it before me," I answered shortly, for the self-complacency of the man nettled me.

He laughed again lightly, though at the same time he withdrew a couple of paces further from me in the direction of the door which gave entrance on to the platform. But his voice remained quite even as he continued: "Really, Mr. Hardinge, you are amazingly bluff, even for one of your race. If you really comprehended how much I have your welfare at heart I am sure you would not adopt this—shall I say cold—attitude towards me."

I knew not what to reply, so I waited for him to continue.

"Possibly you will not believe me when I tell you that my presence here is purely due to my overpowering desire to save you from the consequences of your own actions."

"I certainly shall not believe you," I answered heartily.

"But listen," he said. His voice was of velvety smoothness, with an evenness of intonation which was reminiscent of the purr of a cat. "For a gentleman who makes it his business in life to concern himself with other persons' affairs, m'sieu, if not entirely reckless, is at least imprudent. For instance, after the adventures of the last few days, it was, I say, unwise for m'sieu to return to Paris. It was more than unwise for m'sieu immediately upon his return to visit the Morgue. M'sieu starts. I feel sure he must agree with me. Why should he visit the Morgue unless he should expect to see there some form or face familiar to him? If so, it is the height of imprudence to make such a call unless he has his emotions under perfect control. M'sieu looks and m'sieu finds, and when he finds and cannot control his emotion, m'sieu excites suspicion. Suppose his emotion leads to enquiries. M'sieu of course would court enquiries. Let us suppose that the enquiries are made. What would be revealed? A number of people would remember m'sieu being greeted familiarly at a café, the Quatz' Arts, is it not? Doubtless some of them have already identified the girl now lying at the Morgue and would not fail to recognise m'sieu. Possibly the *cocher* who drove m'sieu and his pretty companion to the house at the Quai d'Auteuil might also be discovered. He also might iden-

tify m'sieu. Enquiries might show that from that time m'sieu's companion is not seen until her body is picked up in the Seine. She has not been drowned. Oh, no. The end has come with a knife thrust in the heart. The police search the apartment to which m'sieu and his companion were driven and they find all the signs of a struggle and much blood. Surely I have m'sieu's interest at heart when I tell him that he is unwise to return to Paris."

I can give no idea of the mockery in his voice as he concluded. I made an effort to answer him, though he had induced in me the feeling that I was caught in a net and that any movement I made would only draw it more tightly about me.

"M'sieu would at least be able to say with whom he left his companion," I answered.

"There would of course be m'sieu's word and the word of Lady Melodé also. But I think not the latter. Then I think m'sieu begins to comprehend why there will be no necessity for my sending my seconds to his friends."

I suppose I must have revealed in my face that it would not be possible for me to call upon Lady Melodé for verification of my departure. I think now that it was in order to learn exactly how much I had gathered concerning the companion of my flight that he had sought the interview, and that he had been reassured by my manner that I was still ignorant of her identity.

"What the devil is the meaning of all this?" I said, putting the best face I could upon my wavering courage.

"M'sieu comprehends my meaning clearly enough," replied my tormentor. "He understands that I have his welfare at heart, though of course I expect his gratitude in return, gratitude that he will show by crossing my path no more."

"That is your own business," I answered. "I have never sought you out yet."

"Nor my path alone," he continued. "M'sieu need fear no trouble provided he is wise enough to see no more of the lady whom he so foolishly befriended, provided that he does not seek her out, and provided that should fate bring him again into her presence he should turn away. If m'sieu is wise in this respect he may yet escape the guillotine or the Ile du Diable."

I was better able to deal with the menace of his later words than the mocking suggestion of his earlier speech. "I'll make no promise," I cried, but I cried to empty space. His face, impassive as one of the gargoyles which had watched us out of its stony eyes, had vanished. He had not waited to hear my reply to his threat. He had turned and gone away swiftly.

"I refuse," I cried again, and only the echo of my own words was thrown back to me from the roof of the cathedral.

CHAPTER XI

THE HOUSE OF PHOTOGRAPHS

For half an hour after d'Hautville's departure I remained leaning on the parapet and gazing upon the white-robed city spread out before me, while the sun sank lower and lower, flushing to a deeper vermilion as it approached the horizon and at last flooding the slopes of the roofs with so rosy a light that my fair white city was turned into a city of blood. The silence was profound, intensified by the low murmur which reached me from the streets below. It was so peaceful that I did not stir until the uneasy twittering of the sparrows warned me that if I lingered much longer I should probably find myself belated on the roof, or forced to remain for the night on the cold stones of the staircase, and having no desire to keep a winter vigil on Notre Dame I retraced my steps to the earth.

That half hour's silent consideration did me good. It enabled me to arrange my thoughts, to see clearly the nature of the trap in which I had been caught, though without bringing me a single step nearer comprehension of the why and wherefore of my in-

volvement. Nor did I see any way out of my difficulty. The most sensible course to pursue, I knew, was to go at once to the police and confide to them the whole story. Thereby I might not only protect myself, but assist justice in placing them on the track of the murderer of Lucille. I had no doubt in my own mind as to who was responsible for the crime. D'Hautville had shown too close an acquaintance with the details to be able to plead ignorance of a first-hand knowledge of it. But I shrank from the sensible course for two reasons. The first was purely personal. D'Hautville's reasoning as to the train of circumstantial evidence against me was undoubtedly strong. I realised that the story I had to tell was on the face of it incredible. How could I ask any one to believe that all my actions had been inspired by a desire to be of service to a woman whose name I did not know, even though I had been in her company for a full twenty-four hours, and of whose present whereabouts I had not the faintest idea? How could I expect the police to believe me? Even if not forthwith placed under arrest I should at least be an object for suspicion and probably be kept under strict surveillance. My second reason was not so purely selfish. I remembered the great anxiety displayed by Lady Melodé in keeping her incognito, and I knew that once the story of the doings of that night were revealed it would be beyond my power to shield her. I still cherished a faith in

my Lady Melodé, and I could not of my own initiative set in motion any power which might bring a breath of scandal upon her name. It seemed to me that the only thing for me to do was to remain perfectly passive and await the outcome of events, little as I relished a policy of inaction. I certainly should have liked to have taken some steps to elucidate the mystery of the death of Lucille, but here my common sense told me that any effort I made would probably result in winding the chain of circumstantial evidence connecting me with the affair still more closely about me, so that here again my hands were tied.

A policy of inaction did not necessarily mean flight, and after careful deliberation, having come to the conclusion that for some reason or other the object of d'Hautville's threats was to drive me from Paris, I decided to remain. I was sorely tempted to break this resolution the next morning when Coles made his appearance to ask for my orders for the day. I think he rather expected to hear that we were starting on our journey southward, for he looked quite disappointed when I told him that I was only going for a short run. He merely replied, "Very good, sir," and disappeared. A laconic man was Coles, and I believe that if I had bidden him drive me to hell he would have replied with the same words, and have taken me over the first precipice that offered itself on the road, so great a particularist was he in his obedience to orders. So far as I

could see he betrayed not the slightest surprise at my recent erratic movements, nor did the slightest curiosity concerning them show itself in his face.

I had no particular plans when I entered the car an hour later, but I suppose it is hardly to be wondered at that I insensibly made for Versailles. The morning was delightful, bright and frosty, and despite nearly an inch of snow on the roads outside the barrier, I managed to put the car along at a pace which produced a pleasant sense of exhilaration. There was no hint of a thaw, and the snow was more like dust than anything else, and we threw up as big a cloud behind us as we should have raised from an English main road at the end of a rainless July.

At Versailles we stopped for déjeuner, and while we partook of the meal I obtained from Coles particulars of the journey from Havre. He had very little to tell me. He had found the car very dirty, he said that it had taken him a good six hours' hard work to get it into trim, but no damage had been done, and he had brought it back without a single stop except at the barrier on entering Paris. I asked him whether any one had questioned him about myself.

"Only the hotel people," he replied. "They did ask me a lot of questions, but what with my French being like a two-horse motor-bike on a one-four gradient and their English like a four-cylinder engine

with three of the cylinders backfiring all the time, I don't think they learned much. From what I did understand, the gent as keeps the hotel and him as looks after the Petrel seemed more surprised at seeing me back again than anything else. They seem to have made up their minds that nothing would ever be heard of us again."

"Of your coming back?" I queried in surprise.

"They seemed to recognise the coat and cap and goggles, and thinking it best, sir, you not having said anything to me, I didn't let on as I hadn't been with you, as I should have liked to have been."

"I should certainly have taken you if I had known where to find you at the moment," I replied I was glad to think that Lady Melodé's incognito had been so carefully preserved, and I added, "If anybody else asks you any questions, I think you may as well stick to the story that you accompanied me."

"Very good, sir," he answered. "I hope you had a pleasant trip, sir?"

I gave him a brief technical history of the run both in the car and the boat, to which he listened with interest, making an observation now and again whenever I referred to any of the minor difficulties I had had with the motors. I did not mention the name of my companion, nor did I refer to the reasons which had led me to take the trip, though in view of any eventuality I was half inclined to take him into my confidence, since I had a thorough knowl-

edge of his trustworthiness. Still I did not do so, and our luncheon finished, we were speedily awheel again.

Then, having nothing better to do, the fancy took me to try and pick out the path upon which I had followed the blue car on the last occasion when I had been at Versailles. At the start I had no difficulty. I ran along the main road and easily found the tree-shaded avenue where I had left it. And now for the first time I realised the nerve which Lady Melodé possessed. It was not an easy track in broad daylight, and I wondered that I had negotiated it safely in the darkness, even with the lights of the blue car in front to serve me as a guide. How she managed to get through without accident at the pace at which she had travelled I could not understand, and I was filled with admiration at her pluck in attempting the feat. I found the next turning beyond a cottage, which I clearly remembered because of a whitewashed wall which I had been within an ace of mistaking for the open road. But after that I was all at sea, for the country was much intersected with by-roads, and it was impossible to remember all the turnings I had taken. But here luck came to my aid. When I had quite given up hope of finding my way, I saw before me a pair of iron gates which seemed familiar in design. I drove up to them, and then I knew that I had come again to the house at which Lady Melodé had stopped and where I had first

heard her voice. Only a glimpse of the house was visible through the screen of snow-laden evergreens guarding it from the road, so stopping my car, I dismounted and stepped up to the gate with the intention of entering.

Snow was resting on the latch and in the drive beyond, neither wheel nor footmark breaking the smooth surface. Yet no snow had fallen for the past twenty-four hours. It looked very much as if the house was uninhabited.

"Stop the engine," I said to Coles. "I want an excuse for calling here. I am sure you can find a loose nut that wants tightening, and for this occasion we have lost our spanner."

"Very good, sir," he answered, as, lifting the latch of the gate, I entered the drive.

Directly I had passed the belt of trees interposed between the house and the road, I found confirmation of my surmise that the house was untenanted. The snow lay unbroken right up to and upon the steps leading to the front door. The lower windows were close shuttered and the uncurtained upper casements seemed so many dead eyes. Nevertheless, in the hope that a caretaker might be somewhere on the premises. I made my way to the entrance and pulled the bell vigorously. The bell pealed noisily through the house, but no one responded to the summons. I turned away and passed round the angle of the building to the servants' entrance. The back

of the house was as destitute of any signs of habitation as the front had been, and the snow showed no signs of footprints anywhere. Still I knocked at the door formally, without anticipating any response, and I was about to retire when I idly turned the handle. To my surprise the door was unfastened and it swung open at the pressure of my hand. Waiting for a few more seconds to see if there was any movement within, I entered and, passing along a passage, found myself in the kitchen of the establishment. It was empty, with a litter of odds and ends strewn about as if it had been vacated in a hurry. Feeling pretty certain by this time that the house was unoccupied, I passed through another passage into the entrance hall. The floors were bare and every room on the ground floor bore the same signs of hasty evacuation. The place did not seem to me to have been long uninhabited, for the wall papers were fresh and bright, and the musty scent of the unoccupied house was conspicuously absent. I went upstairs, and here a mere glance into each room was sufficient to assure me that each was empty. Growling to myself at the unsatisfactory termination of my search, I returned downstairs and retraced my steps along the passage leading to the back entrance. On my way I observed a door of a room I had not entered and I tried the handle. To my surprise the door was locked. I passed on until I came to the exit. There was no one about. I re-

turned and tried the fastened door again. With a smile at the absurdity of the thought that I should find anything hidden behind, I drew myself up against the opposite wall of the passage and hurled myself against the barrier. The lock was not strong enough to withstand the weight of my twelve stone, and bursting away from the hasp, the door flew open and I tumbled head foremost into the closed room.

As I picked myself up I gathered that I was in a studio of a sort built out from the house. Only a dim light filtered into the apartment from a snow-laden skylight in the roof, but enough to show me that the room was furnished and that more light might be obtained from three curtained and shuttered windows stretching on one side. I straightway unbarred the shutters of one window and glanced around. I observed that the place seemed to have been but recently inhabited, for there were ashes in the stove, coffee cups and liqueur glasses stood on a little table, and a pair of slippers lay on a rug as if they had just been thrown aside. But the room was unoccupied now, and I glanced at the walls. Pictures of some sort covered them, and another stood on an easel at the end farthest from the entrance. The light from the one window I had unbarred was not sufficient to enable me to see the subjects, so I unshuttered the others and drew back the curtains to the fullest ex-

tent. When I had done this I turned round to make a more complete survey.

A brilliant light from the window I had last uncurtained fell full upon the picture standing on the easel, and at sight of it the blood rushed to my head and I swayed back against the wall. For a few seconds my vision was blurred, but as my sight came back to me you can imagine my feelings—perhaps you cannot, but no matter—when I saw standing on the easel a life-size portrait of the girl—woman—she whom I knew as Lady Melodé. There was no mistaking the face, every feature of it had been burned in upon my memory. Even as in the picture, so she had looked at me with challenging eyes; even as in the picture her lips slightly parted had smiled upon me. But it was not the recognition of these details that set my brain whirling. It was a life-size portrait—a portrait of the nude. The challenge of the eyes and of the smile was accompanied by the allurement of uplifted arms as posed in an attitude of welcome she appeared to be stepping from the frame to greet all comers. The picture was not the work of a painter; but, worse to my mind by far, the production of a photographer, and the camera had reproduced only too faithfully the detail that the artist would have eliminated.

The sight of the portrait shattered at one blow all the illusions I had formed regarding the woman whom I had endowed in my thoughts with all the

qualities of womanhood. At that moment I hated her intensely, despite her undeniable beauty. I turned away from the easel to glance at the other pictures on the walls. There were twenty or thirty of them, all portraits of Lady Melodé in a variety of stages of dishabille, or posed for the nude. There was a sneer on my lips when I finished my survey. After all, I thought d'Hautville was not far wrong when he told me that it would be better in my own interests to have nothing to do with the woman. I laughed loudly to think that I should have been so imposed upon by a woman of such sort. I came back to the easel again, and the sight of the picture set free a spirit of anger within me. If the original had been there I should have killed her at that moment, despite the fact, perhaps all the more because of it, that I could not look upon the photograph without my head growing hot and my pulses beating fast. So hot grew my anger at last that it overmastered my sanity. I took the picture from the easel, and rending the frame, I tore the thing to pieces. Then I ranged round the room, leaving not one single specimen of the other photographs recognisable, and when I had destroyed the lot I turned and went out of the house.

CHAPTER XII

THE GATHERING OF THE CLOUDS

COLES was executing an impromptu war-dance in the snow, with the object of keeping his fingers and toes alive, when I returned to the gate.

"Seen any one?" I asked.

"Not a soul, sir," he replied. "Shall I start the engine?"

"Yes," I said. "We will get back to Paris as soon as we can and to-morrow we will go south as fast as the car will take us."

"Very good, sir," he answered, with an emphasis on the "very" which was the strongest form of approval that he ever permitted himself to bestow upon any of my projects.

I had no difficulty in finding my way out of the tangle of cross-roads, for after a couple of turns taken at random, I struck the broad main road and put the bonnet of the car in the direction of Paris. I knew pretty well whereabouts we were by this time, and at any other time I should have felt a keen delight in the ride before me, for the road cut through the Forest of Fontainebleau. But my heart

was sick, and the sight of the fairyland into which we soon entered failed to appeal to me. I was in the vein to declare all beauty a mere cloak for corruption, and beneath the fair white snow I fancied masses of foul fungi and rotting garbage. It was stupid, of course, but this is a faithful record of my doings and feelings, and I have no desire to pose as a philosopher. Therefore, I must admit that I made haste to leave the country behind and welcomed the sight of the town. The glare of the electric light was at the moment far more congenial to me than nature in her unsympathetic winter mood.

I had felt lonely on Christmas day, but it was nothing to the black cloud of depression which descended on me this particular evening. When I look back upon those hours now, I wonder that I was not led to the perpetration of some more outrageous folly than even that of which I had been guilty. Why I was not so led I cannot tell, probably because the little devil of opportunity kept out of my way. I know I sought an attractive folly in half a dozen haunts where customarily she might be found, finishing up with supper at Maxime's, but I found no distraction, only an increasing weariness of the flesh. I did not even remain at Maxime's to finish my meal, for when half way through supper a noted demi-mondaine seated at an adjoining table began to make her already sufficiently décolleté costume still more décolleté in response to the challenge of one of her

companions, who dared her to disrobe. I came away. Her action reminded me of those photographs of the woman I was striving to forget.

I went back to my hotel, and tossing about sleeplessly all the night, I was glad when the morning came. Then I just scribbled a letter to Mervyn, telling him that I had discovered all that I wanted, and was resuming my interrupted tour, and, after settling my bills, I set forth on my travels.

I am not going to give an account of them here, for they have no bearing upon the story I have taken upon myself to relate. I doubt, indeed, whether I could give any complete account of them. My restlessness led me hither and thither, first southward to the Riviera, then eastward through Italy and on into Austria, and then southward again into parts where I doubt if a motor car had ever been seen before. I experienced the usual difficulties, not the least being the impossibility of procuring petrol, and on three or four occasions I found myself stranded in out of the way parts of the world for three or four days at a time, until I could get a supply forwarded to me. I had worn the keen edge off my disappointment, however, when I came back to the Riviera in February, where I stayed for a week at Nice, filling up my time at the Casino while my car was being thoroughly overhauled. I had phenomenal luck. Every time I sat down at the table I rose again with my pockets full of my winnings, and at

last when I entered the rooms a little crowd would gather about me and follow my play. I had no desire to be a walking advertisement for the Casino, so I hurried off as soon as my car was ready. I did not make my way directly homewards. While staying at Nice I had seen in the motoring papers that a new race for amateurs only was proposed to be brought off in the ensuing season over the Auvergne circuit, and with a view of entering it, I thought I should like to see what the course was like. So I went on to Royat and spent three days there, running over the courses once on each day. The roads were in a beastly condition, but I gained a fair knowledge of the track nevertheless, and when I had obtained a sufficient acquaintance with the difficulties to be encountered in a race, I set my face northwards again, and early in March found myself once more in London.

During the whole period of my absence, save for a few mere acquaintances I had met at Monte Carlo, I had not seen a familiar face, and not once met a man whom I might have labelled friend. With one exception—I had nearly forgotten the faithful Coles. Though he was a valet-chauffeur at a fixed weekly wage, I think I may claim that he was also my friend, and a real good one at that. Whatever my mood, he was always the same imperturbably cheerful Coles. Whatever contretemps befell, his serenity was never ruffled. If he guessed that anything was

troubling me, never by word or look did he hint at his knowledge. I learned a good deal of him during the two months when he was my sole companion. I had broken through the wall of his "Very good, sir," and found that he was a very level-headed, clean-minded specimen of humanity, with a much wider outlook on life than his enthusiasm for the mechanism of a motor would lead one to suppose.

Coles, then, had proved himself companionable enough to supply all my necessities for a couple of months; nevertheless, I was glad enough to find myself back in London, with a wider choice of friends with whom to interchange ideas. And almost the first man I met was Mervyn. His was the first face I saw on entering the club, and upon catching sight of me he rose from his arm chair and came across the room to greet me.

"All right?" he enquired, as we shook hands.

"Fit enough," I answered, though with a hesitation he was bound to notice.

"I see you still wear the ring," he remarked casually.

"Yes," I answered bitterly. "I wear it as fitly emblematic of the person who gave it to me."

In my first rage at discovering the true character of the woman who had befooled me I had intended throwing it away, especially since it had figured on the finger of the woman whose photographs I had de-

stroyed, but I kept it eventually for the reason I had now made Mervyn acquainted with.

"Then you have learned something since I told you that history?" he said.

In a moment the determination took me to confide the whole story of my adventure to Mervyn. "Look here, old fellow," I said. "I have a lot to tell you. Will you dine with me here to-night and come back with me to my chambers afterwards?"

"With pleasure," he replied. Then some other men we knew came up to us and conversation became general.

Not until we were alone in my chambers with the whiskey bottle between us did I say anything about the matter, but then I disburdened my mind of my story. While I talked he smoked, and by the time I had finished the narration the tray at his elbow was full of ash and cigarette ends. I had given the fullest particulars with which I could charge my memory, and not by a single word did he interrupt. Even when the conclusion was reached he still remained silent, so that I asked him his views of the whole matter.

"You returned home through Paris?" he asked, to my surprise, instead of replying to my question.

"Yes," I answered, "but what has that to do with it?"

"I wonder you were not kept there," he said.

"Kept in Paris!" I said. "What was there to keep me in Paris?"

Mervyn rose from his chair and his face became animated. "By Jove! Hardinge," he said, "you obviously have a very imperfect realisation of the peril you are in."

"Stuff!" I responded. "I am quite able to protect myself against half a dozen Lady Melodés and d'Hautvilles."

"I judge you did not see many French newspapers after your departure from Paris for the Riviera?" he enquired.

"I don't suppose I bought a paper for a month at least."

"Otherwise you would have known that the 'Affaire Lucille Clement' provided a seven days' sensation for the Parisian press. Even the English papers devoted a good deal of space to it."

"The affaire Lucille Clement?" I asked. "I don't quite follow you."

"Lucille Clement was the name of the girl who accosted you in the Quatz' Arts," he said, "and the mystery of the way she met her death has never yet been elucidated. The story interested me," he continued, "though naturally it did not occur to me to connect it in any way with you. I was in Paris myself at the time, and like many other lovers of the gruesome, I visited the spots connected with the murder of the girl out of sheer curiosity. From

what I know about the case—and a good deal of my information is from official sources—I am afraid, Hardinge, that there is quite enough evidence against you to introduce you to M. de Paris."

"But——" I began.

"My dear fellow," he remarked, with a touch of impatience in his tone, "why in heaven's name did you not at once give information to the police of your identification of the body? Your silence makes things appear terribly black against you. It is almost tantamount to a confession of guilt."

"I don't see why," I answered.

"Then you must be extraordinarily dense," he said. "Let me tell you what has been discovered and then judge for yourself. First of all, the identification of the girl is complete. There is no need to give the details of her early life. It is just the ordinary life story of the grisette who finds the life of bourgeois morality not quite exciting enough. She seems to have been pretty well known at one time at the Quatz' Arts. Then eighteen months previous to her death she announced her intention of breaking away entirely from the life she was leading, telling a number of acquaintances that she was going to take service as maid with an English lady. No one believed her, but she disappeared from her old haunts and nothing was seen of her until the night when she accosted you as an old friend at the café. She was recognised by a number of persons on that

occasion, and though the description given by members of the audience who recalled the appearance of the man she greeted are characterised by a little Gallic exuberance, I think there would be no difficulty in identifying you with the person in question."

"I am quite prepared to admit that I was the man," I said.

"Then let me carry the matter further," he continued. "The cabman who drove you to the Quai d'Auteuil has been discovered and declares that he will be able to identify his fare. Now, the top flat in the house had been taken by Lucille Clement three days before Christmas. She had told the *concierge* that she was expecting to be joined by an English friend, presumably yourself. No one was seen to have visited her. She went out and came in alone until the night when you entered with her. After that night she was not seen again until her body was taken out of the Seine. When the police, having identified her, went to search the apartments at the Quai d'Auteuil they discovered a room in disorder, with traces of a severe struggle and the floor bespattered with blood. But the murderer, whoever he was, had been so careful that he had not left behind him a single clue to his identity."

"The evidence is certainly strong," I muttered.

"There is one other point," he added.

A market woman who had paid a visit to the Morgue on the day the body was discovered remem-

bers an Englishman, who was there at the same time as herself, emerge looking very much agitated. She paid particular attention to him and is confident that she would be able to identify him."

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated. I began to feel as if the rope were already noosed about my neck.

"Why on earth did you not go at once to the police and tell them the whole story?" he reiterated. "The Parisian police are discreet."

"At all events, I hope you do not think that I am a murderer," I said miserably.

"Don't talk rot," he commented cheerily.

"Thanks," I said, so heartily that he smiled.

"All the same, if you were charged with the crime ninety-nine people out of a hundred would believe you to be guilty," he continued, "and you must expect no mercy from d'Hautville."

"I do not quite see that," I said. "He had it in his power to denounce me a couple of months ago if he had wished. Why should he do so now?"

Mervyn thought for a minute before replying slowly. "To my mind his reasons are pretty evident. I have no doubt that he is the murderer or was in some way implicated. At the time he threatened you he probably feared an investigation more than you did. If such was the case the reasons for his action are clear. His object was to scare you so that any notion you may have entertained of communicating the death of the girl to the police should

seem likely to menace your own safety. By this time he has probably been able to destroy any evidence against himself which may have been in existence."

"Or he may not," I replied. "What do you say to my returning to Paris and telling my story now?"

"Too late," said Mervyn, "unless you are prepared to substantiate your tale by the production of an essential witness."

"My Lady Melodé?" I asked.

"Lady Melodé, née Molly Temple," he replied. "I need hardly suggest that, even if you were able to find her, she would not be a very creditable witness."

"What am I to do then?" I asked in exasperation.

"Go to bed and sleep over it," he replied. "You may expect me to breakfast in the morning; perhaps both our brains will be brighter then."

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLUE CAR REAPPEARS

THE morning found me no nearer a decision as to the best course to pursue than the evening had left me. Nor had Mervyn any definite suggestion to make when he arrived in fulfilment of his overnight promise. He was, like myself, at a total loss to account for the motives which had animated the various actors in the events which I have narrated, and he agreed with me that unless we could obtain some light on the events which had preceded my appearance on the scene it was worse than useless to take any steps whatever. I was more than half inclined to bid a long adieu to Europe for a time, and only that it would have been such a confession of cowardice I would at once have made preparations for an expedition into the interior of New Guinea or some other region where the dangers of existence would be less terrifying because they would come upon one unannounced.

I might even have risked the charge of cowardice had not Mervyn taken a less serious view of my position than he had done the previous night. His

morning conclusion was that at present I was in no particular danger from denunciation, either directly or anonymously, by d'Hautville, who alone was able to give away my identity. "What you have to fear," he declared, "is another meeting with Lady Melodé. For some reason or other, probably because he may have ascertained that her ladyship proposes to instal you in his place, he intends to keep this charge to use as a lever to hoist you out of the way if necessary."

"The necessity is not likely to arise then," I answered. "I am not likely to meet Lady Melodé again, and if I were to meet her, I should be still less likely to speak to her."

"The improbable is always likely to happen," declared Mervyn sententiously. "There may be a special likelihood in your case unknown to you at present."

"If I were to meet her I should demand an explanation," I said.

"That may be precisely what d'Hautville fears," he replied.

"Then the easiest way of bringing matters to a climax would be for me to search until I found her," I cried with an eagerness which surprised even myself.

"Your folly is as great as mine, Hardinge," said Mervyn, with almost a sneer. "Cannot you take

warning by my experience, or did I tell you my story in vain?"

"I know there seems very little doubt that Molly Temple and my Lady Melodé are the same," I answered humbly, "but while there is a doubt—— Look here, Mervyn, I have been telling myself for two months and more that they are the same and that the woman who has borne two names is the most abandoned of her sex, but whenever I remember the straightforward glance of her eyes, whenever I recall the sound of her voice, the doubt springs up again. After all the names are different."

"Names," he said. "What's in a name? I have been making one or two enquiries on my own account since I told you my story, and I have learned something."

"Well?" I asked eagerly.

"I have learned that Temple was the family name of the Castleford family; that Molly Temple, through her father's ultimate accession to the title, would to-day be Lady Molly Temple. That would explain the assumption of the title."

"Who are the Castlefords?" I asked.

"It was an Irish earldom which became extinct with Colonel Temple's death. As a matter of fact, he only bore it for a few months."

"Still they might not be the same," I contended.

"Your description of Lady Melodé exactly describes the woman who betrayed me ten years ago,

and what are ten years to a woman nowadays? Besides, have you not the evidence of your own eyes in the house of the photographs to tell you what manner of woman you befriended?"

I had no answer to make. I could only repeat the question I had put on the preceding night, "What am I to do?"

This time he had an answer ready. "Do nothing," he replied decisively.

"I would rather do something," I said.

"You must live your ordinary life, go about as if nothing had occurred to disturb it in any way. Meanwhile I will return to Paris and see what I can find out in the light of what you have told me."

"You will go to Paris?" I said. "Why should you trouble yourself with my affairs?"

A grim smile appeared for a moment on his face. "You flatter yourself, Hardinge," he answered. "Remember I have an unsettled account with the man d'Hautville, and for such accounts there is no statute of limitations. It seems to me that the time is approaching when I may be able to exact payment in full." His tone altered. "Go about your everyday affairs. Keep your name well before the motoring public, so that everybody will know where you are, and do not tell a single soul that you have confided your secret to the nonentity before you."

I wrung his hand fervently. "You are a d——d good pal," I said.

"Really, Hardinge," he drawled, "you are almost offensively grateful for nothing. In reality it is I who ought to be grateful to you for awakening in me a new interest in life."

So the matter was arranged between us, and when Mervyn left me it was to pack his bag with the intention of catching the night train to Paris, while I at once started planning how best I could fulfil his instructions of getting my movements chronicled in the newspapers. One easy method of achieving this object at once presented itself. I knew that I had only to enter my name for the new amateur's race to get the fact recorded in the motoring gossip of the press, so my first step took me to the Automobile Club to obtain particulars of the contest. There I learned that the conditions were practically the same as those which used to govern the Gordon Bennett race, with the exception that the driving was to be done by *bona fide* owners of the cars and that no manufacturer was to be allowed to compete. The only difficulty in the way of my entering was the necessity of the competing cars being built in the country of competitors, for hitherto I had driven a Mercèdés, and I doubted whether I should be able to make myself perfectly acquainted with the peculiarities of another type of car even if I could get one built in time for the eliminating trials.

There was no harm in trying at all events, and selecting half a dozen of the most likely firms I at

once set out to see if I could bespeak a car which would suit my purpose. Here fortune favoured me. I had no further to go than New Burlington Street to obtain exactly what I required. Messrs. Napier had on their hands a six-cylinder racing car which had been built to compete in this very race. But the man who had ordered it had slipped on a piece of banana skin on the pavement, and his executors had asked the manufacturers to do their best to dispose of it. I made an appointment to go to the works that same afternoon to view the chassis, which had been completed, and returned to my chambers, where I informed Coles of my new project. I need hardly say that there was an especial emphasis on the "very" of his "Very good, sir."

I took him with me to the factory that afternoon, and I was pleased enough with what I saw to clinch the bargain, and the same night I entered my name for the race.

There can be no point in my describing my doings of the next few days. I like to know all about any car I am going to drive, so I spent the best part of a week at the Napier works making myself thoroughly acquainted with the mechanism. Then, in order that I might not find myself fogged, I bought a forty-horse touring car of the same make for my everyday use. In this way the time passed pretty rapidly and I found that I had no time to brood on the past. Once or twice I received a brief note from

Mervyn saying that so far he had discovered nothing of interest, and I ceased to worry about the charge hanging over my head.

April came. My racing car was completed and I had it out several times before the time arrived to send it off under Coles' charge to the Isle of Man to be tuned up for the eliminating trials. I was immensely pleased with the car, and I felt more gay at heart than I had done since the beginning of the year.

Then the unexpected, as Mervyn had prophesied, happened. I had taken back the car for some finishing touches to the workshop and dropped into the club afterwards, wishing that Mervyn would return to town, so that we could run away out of town together for the week-end. He not being available, I suggested trips to two or three of my acquaintances whom I found in the smoking-room, but they were all fixed up, and I was bemoaning my prospective solitude when a man named Duxworth, who had been in the same house as myself at Eton and had followed me a year after to Oxford, joined the circle. He listened while I made my complaint, and when I had done he startled me by saying, "Look here, Hardinge, if you really are doing nothing this week-end you might as well take me down to my mater's place and spend the week-end with us."

"Oh, hang it all! I wasn't fishing," I answered.

"I know that," he laughed, "but if you will come, I can assure you a warm welcome."

"Unpremeditated guests do not always enter into the scheme of things," I observed, though the invitation appealed to me.

"You will only find a family party," he answered. "It is too early in the year for a riverside house to be full."

After that I made no bones about accepting the invitation, and I picked him up in my big Napier at four that same afternoon. I was alone, having given Coles a holiday before the trials began. The day was delightful, though as there had been no rain for a fortnight the dust lay pretty heavy out of town. Our route lay through Ealing and Uxbridge, and what with the tram-lines and traffic I had no chance of showing off the points of my recent purchase for a long while. Still the time passed cheerfully. Though I had been acquainted with Mr. Duxworth from boyhood, I knew very little about him, and was surprised to find what a pleasant companion he proved himself. I had always thought him to be an idle sort of person, without any definite interest in life, and now I discovered that differing temperaments had merely diverted our several energies into entirely different channels. Apparently he had been studying men and women while I had been studying motor cars, and something he said made me remark that he ought to write a novel.

"Such is a mere novelist's fame compared with an automobilist's," he answered.

"You don't mean to say that you do write novels?" I asked.

"You will find six of 'em in Mudie's list," he replied.

"If it wasn't for the dust you would see me blushing for my ignorance," I said.

"I doubt it, Hardinge," he answered. "You haven't a particle of shame in your composition."

We had just cleared Uxbridge when the conversation reached this stage, and, seeing the road clear ahead, I put my car on her top speed by way of showing that I knew something of one subject at least. We climbed the hill toward Gerard's Cross in most excellent style, and had come to the spot where the common skirts the road, when I saw a cloud of dust ahead of me.

"Would you like to experience one of the chief difficulties of racing?" I said to Duxworth.

He nodded. I had been wearing my goggles on my cap hitherto, but now I pulled them down over my eyes. I could tell by the size of the dust cloud in front that the car was a big one. As soon as the glasses were firmly fixed I proceeded to overhaul the car in front. We were soon in the dust cloud, and I sounded my horn furiously preparatory to passing. But the owner of the car in front clearly had no intention of being passed. At the sound of my horn

its speed was increased, and soon I was doing all I knew in order to retain my position.

Luckily there was nothing in the road for the next couple of miles, not even a policeman, then the leading car slackened its pace and we shot past.

"How do you like it?" I asked Duxworth, when I dropped to the regulation twenty miles an hour.

"Ripping," he said. "But you have overshot our turning."

I put the car about, and then I observed that the car we had passed had slackened speed in order to turn off the main road, and by the time I had reached the bye-road it had disappeared. In a few minutes I sighted it once more, and again the sound of my horn acted upon it like a new form of accelerator. I had caught a glimpse of the car as we had drawn closer to it, and I had noticed that it was enamelled in blue. I wondered whether I was fated to pursue blue cars for the rest of my life. A little later, as we ran more slowly over a stretch of recently watered roadway near Marlow, I perceived that the driver of the car in front was a woman, and alone. I began to think that my senses were deserting me.

"Now, then, Hardinge, you are not going to let us be beaten by a lady driver?" chaffed Duxworth. "Follow that car and you will reach our place all right."

I made no answer. But I followed, since I could not pass it. I followed it through the little town and

over the bridge, and even into the wide gates leading to a house hidden away in the woods which overhang the river, pulling up only when it came to a standstill. The lady who had been driving dismounted, and was exchanging greetings with two other ladies on the lawn when Duxworth also dismounted, and, turning to me, remarked: "Come along, Hardinge, you are not going to sit there all day, are you? I want to introduce you to my mother and my sister and my cousin."

CHAPTER XIV

MY LADY MELODÉ AGAIN

BEFORE I could properly collect my scattered senses I found myself presented to a sweet-faced, grey-haired lady as Duxworth's mother, and a vivacious dark girl as his sister. Then turning to the lady whose car we had been pursuing, he said: "I thought my dear cousin would like to discuss her favourite hobby with an expert on the subject. Hardinge, you haven't met Lady Moira Temple, better known to her friends as Lady Melodé, before, I think?"

I muttered something, I do not know what, as my hand went up to my cap, and I was thankful for the first time in my life for a thick coat of dust on my face. Fortunately, Lady Melodé was better prepared for the meeting than I was.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Hardinge," she said. "I little thought who was pursuing me so vigorously. You must confess I held my own."

I made a desperate effort to assume the casual air of the newly introduced. "Have you often been fined, Lady Melodé?" I asked.

There had been a slight tremor in her voice when she had first spoken, but that had disappeared when she answered gaily, "Never yet."

"I am sure you must owe your escape to the innate gallantry of the county constabulary, then," I replied. "A mere man would never be able to drive a car at such a pace and hope to get off scot free."

"Melodé has hardly taken out her big car since she had it over from Paris," explained Mrs. Duxworth. "I don't think she quite realises that there is a speed limit enforced on our English roads."

"I am afraid she will soon be made aware of the fact," I commented, "if she makes a habit of driving at the pace she was going to-day."

Then Duxworth chimed in, and the conversation became general, until Mrs. Duxworth told us that we should just have time for a wash before tea. As we entered the house Lady Melodé was just before me, and a softly whispered "Thank you" just reached my ears as she passed indoors.

I will not try to describe the state of my mind as I followed Duxworth upstairs to make myself presentable. Chance sets strange puzzles for man's solution, but never was a stranger one than was now presented to me. What ought I to do under all the circumstances of the case? It had been easy in her absence to declare, as I had declared to Mervyn, that even if I should meet her again I should pass her as a stranger, but I had never contemplated an intro-

duction to her as a member of a household to which I had been invited as a guest, a household whose members could know nothing of the facts which had become known to me, or why that softly spoken word of thanks? Was it my duty to inform my friend? If it had been, I know I should have failed in that duty, for the moment her eyes had met mine, the moment I had heard her voice, I knew that there was no other woman in the world for me. Perhaps, after all, the evidence against her could be explained away. I knew from my own experience how black a case could be made against a purely innocent person.

I was so occupied with my thoughts that I paid no attention to what my host was saying until I caught Lady Melodé's name.

"You two are sure to get on. In fact—though don't you give me away—it was Melodé herself who suggested that I should bring you down. She is tremendously keen on motoring, and probably thinks you will be able to give her some tips. She suggested it when I happened to mention your name, and I was glad to fall in with her wishes. Good-looking girl, isn't she?"

I agreed heartily.

"I admire her myself immensely," he rambled on, "but, you know, she is so impatient with the mere observer. She loves action so long as she can be one of the actors. She insists upon being in the

thick of everything which is going forward, and if you suggest that there is anything for which she is unfitted, well, she turns up her pretty nose and sniffs. Oh, yes, she can sniff, old fellow. I've heard her. She sniffs at me and my novels, and tells me that it is better to mend the roads than to spin a web of words for the enmeshment of subscribers to the *Times* book club. I am not sure whether it is training or original sin which is responsible for such an unfeminine attitude to life. Probably both. She was a daughter of a younger son of a younger son of an Earl of Castleford, who never expected to inherit the title. Colonel Temple was his name——"

"Colonel Temple?" I asked, conscious that another nail had been hammered into the coffin which held my hopes.

"Did you ever meet him?" enquired Duxworth. "I should have thought that he was before your time."

"No," I replied. "I heard a friend of mine, who had been in India, mention his name the other day."

"The Colonel married my mother's sister," he continued, "and the odds were about a thousand to one against his ever succeeding to the title, but fate plays strange pranks. A yachting accident, a minor war, and some faulty drains in a Midland country house, between them cleared the way to an Irish peerage and a considerable income. He didn't live long afterward to enjoy either. He left everything

to Melodé except, of course, the title; he couldn't do that, or he would have done so, for he had no one else to leave anything to, as my aunt had died soon after Moira was born. She was always allowed to do exactly as she liked, with the consequence that she has an amount of self-reliance remarkable even in this advanced age. You had better look out for yourself, therefore, Hardinge, for if she should take a fancy to you she is quite capable of proposing to you out of hand."

"It might be difficult to refuse," I replied, ambiguously.

Duxworth laughed. "If Melodé sets her mind on anything she generally gets it," he said, "though perhaps I ought not to generalise, for I cannot say that I know a great deal of her."

"I suppose, as cousins, you have known her from babyhood?" I hazarded, anxious for a break in the chain of identification which coupled her with the Molly Temple who had figured in Mervyn's life.

"Never saw her until a year ago," he answered. "Temple did not hit it off with my governor, and though we knew of Melodé's existence, that was about all. What I know of her early life is from her own lips. From her I have gathered that Colonel Temple was always on the run to some out-of-the-way part of the earth or other, while Melodé was left to her own devices. Why, she tells me that she was an art student in Paris for three or four years,

and when her father died nobody but the solicitor who acted for him knew her address."

My hopes grew less and less as he talked on. Nevertheless, I ventured another question. "How did you find her out?" I asked.

"She did the finding," he replied. "I remember the day when she introduced herself, perfectly. I was reading a bit of the novel I was writing at the time, to my mother—it is a habit of mine, Hardinge—when the door opened, and without a word of warning the man announced Lady Melodé Temple. We hadn't time even to look surprised. "I hope you won't refuse a rich relation a cup of tea, auntie," she said in that sweet voice of hers—Lord! what perfect music that girl's voice makes!—and from that moment she has simply reigned in this house when she deigns to visit us."

"I suppose you read your novels to her now?" I asked, with my face half buried in the towel.

"Not I," he answered. "I tried it once."

"Why not twice?" I queried, not quite innocently.

He laughed before replying, shortly: "She knows too much." Then after a pause he continued: "It was far too disheartening. She would put any novelist out of conceit with his poor little puppets in five minutes. But there, she has taught me something, so I ought to be grateful, though I do prefer my mother as an audience. Ready? Come down

to tea, and I will guarantee you will understand what I mean before Monday morning."

I followed him downstairs to the drawing-room. There were three or four other guests staying in the house, and one or two callers present; but though I chattered to everybody, I had no eyes for anyone but Lady Melodé. I was longing for the opportunity to speak to her alone. But not a chance presented itself then, or throughout the evening.

When I retired to my bedroom that night I was in a condition bordering on stupefaction. Never by look or word had she suggested that I shared with her a secret that she wished to be kept from the world. Yet I knew that there was a secret she feared might be discovered. Common sense could place only one interpretation upon her attitude, but from that interpretation my whole nature revolted. I could not believe, after being in her company the whole evening, that she was other than the pure woman she appeared to be. I had seen her visit the house of the photographs. I knew that her maid had not been a reputable character. I had known that she had made an appointment with d'Hautville, and had been on terms of familiarity with him. Save for an alteration of the Christian name, her name was identical with that of the girl who had wrecked Mervyn's life. I had learned that day that she had been living, or had given out that she had been living, in Paris for some years. She had given me Mervyn's

betrothal ring. What could I think? I recalled the Miladis and Becky Sharps of fiction, and I told myself that innocence was a mask which none but the finished actress could wear. Even then, the memory of the fearless glance with which she had met mine when we were alone on the Petrel, as it had met mine more than once on this evening, forbade me to think that she could be the abandoned creature the evidence made her out to be.

There was an additional horror which may be more easily imagined than described. Every time my glance fell upon her I saw her posing for one or other of the studies that decorated the studio wall of the house of the photographs. When I was alone that night I struck at the walls of my room until my knuckles were bruised and torn, as I fought blindly to put that ugly memory to flight. To think that the woman I loved—impossible!—impossible!!—impossible!!! I put the thought from me at last. I think I should have gone mad if I had not succeeded in doing so.

Before I slept I made a resolution that the morrow should not pass without my coming to an explanation with Lady Melodé. The morning came, but not the opportunity for the tête-à-tête I desired. A jaunt to Oxford on our cars was proposed, and about eleven-thirty they were brought round. I drove one car and Lady Melodé the other. The morning was a pleasant one, and the outward run, via Aston Row-

ant, passed without incident. We had a merry lunch at the Mitre, and, after a stroll round, started on our return journey by way of Wallingford and Henley. We had met very few automobilists, and passed none on the unfrequented stretch of road by which we had reached Oxford, but on the more used highway by which we returned there were many more motorists awheel. We had overtaken several before we reached the cross-roads outside Wallingford, amongst others a powerful white car, the owner of which seemed to resent having been passed, for he hung on behind for four or five miles, and when we commenced the ascent to Nettlebed he let his car go and slipped past me on his highest speed. I should have liked to have tried the speed of my Napier against his, and I increased my pace, hoping that Lady Melodé, who was leading me about a quarter of a mile ahead, would take up the challenge. But she allowed the stranger to slip by, and I fell back to keep clear of the dust.

The ascent to Nettlebed is fairly stiff, but nothing to present any real difficulty, and I was surprised when I reached the summit to find the Mercèdés pulled up at the side of the road and the engine not running.

"What's the matter?" I asked as I ran alongside.

"Something gone wrong with the cooling apparatus," was the reply.

I jumped down from my seat and approached the

car. A glance at the indicator showed that the cooling apparatus was nearly empty. "What is it? A leaky pipe?" I asked. Then, as I noticed a big puddle of steaming moisture on the road: "It looks as if the leak is a big one."

"I don't think there was any leak," replied Lady Melodé quickly, and with an air of embarrassment. "I think there must have been an air block in the circulation. That puddle is the water I have run off through the drain cock."

"Then all we have to do is to get enough water to refill," I said.

"That is all," she answered promptly. "That is why I stopped here." She pointed as she spoke to a little inn standing back about twenty yards from the road.

"I will see what can be done," I said, and I turned towards the inn. Then the chance I had been awaiting presented itself, for Lady Melodé joined me, but I knew not how to take advantage of it, especially as my companion said in the most matter-of-fact way: "It was very annoying to be compelled to stop just as that white car had passed."

"I wondered why you allowed yourself to be passed so easily," I remarked. I looked up the road, and I saw the car returning. "Hullo! Here he is again."

"Perhaps the owner is as anxious for a race as you are," she said, just as we reached the inn door.

I paid no more attention to the stranger, for at the moment I entered the inn, leaving Lady Melodé on the porch. The woman whom I found in charge of the bar was none too amiable when she ascertained that my principal requirement was a can of water, and it was not until I had made her understand that I was quite ready to pay the price of beer for it that she showed any alacrity to provide for my requirements. Two minutes elapsed before she had provided me with the water and I was able to rejoin Lady Melodé. As I came out of the door I saw that one of the two occupants of the white car was just entering. I paid no attention to the fact, for he was obviously just a professional motorman, and Lady Melodé came forward and joined me, returning with me to the car. The water tank was soon filled and I took the can back alone, this time Lady Melodé making no attempt to join me, much to my disgust, for by this time I had thought of an introductory question to the explanation I sought. A little later we were off again, leaving the white car behind us. But not for long. Soon I heard it humming along behind, but this time it was clear that Lady Melodé had no intention of being beaten. The procession of three cars swept on in the same order through Henley, nor changed until we came to Marlow, where we turned to the right across the bridge, and the stranger, parting company, kept straight on through the town.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRYST BY THE RIVER

SOMEHOW, I could not rid myself of the presentiment that the white car which had followed us that afternoon had done so with some ulterior object though I had not the slightest reason for the surmise. The impression was deepened by Lady Melodé's attitude during the evening. She was gay, but there was something hectic in her gaiety, so that it seemed to me forced, and not the spontaneous cheerfulness of an untroubled heart. Again I watched for an opportunity for a private conversation, but she seemed to be aware of my desire and to avoid giving me the chance I sought.

After dinner we had some music. Lady Melodé sang to her cousin's accompaniment. The others made up a table at bridge. Then I thought that I should get my chance, but Lady Melodé retired. I slipped away to the smoking-room for a consolatory cigar. The room was in darkness save for the firelight and the moonbeams which streamed in through the unshuttered windows, and being in a moonlight mood I forbore to ring for lights.

How long I brooded in the dim light I do not know. My cigar had gone out, and I was gazing out of the window, when I saw a figure that I recognised flit past. Here then was my opportunity for a quiet tête-à-tête. The thought flashed through my mind that Lady Melodé had guessed that I might be watching for her reappearance, and desired to meet me quite alone. It was a foolish supposition, but I did not wait to analyse it. I sprang to my feet, and, unfastening the catch of the window, stepped on to the lawn.

On the far side Lady Melodé was just disappearing in the shadow of the trees, and I saw that she had taken a path leading to the river. My first idea gave place to the thought that, finding her troubles more than she could bear, she had succumbed to the temptation to end them. I rushed across the lawn, but before I reached the trees that thought, too, had passed from me. Lady Melodé was no neurotic girl, to be moved by hysteria to self-slaughter. Still, I followed the path she had taken, though but slowly, for now I began to doubt whether I should be welcomed. If she had wanted an explanation she could easily have made opportunity, yet—I went on.

The path wound down the hillside until it emerged upon a lawn which provided a river frontage for the house hidden away in the trees above. Under ordinary circumstances, I could have descended in three minutes, but owing to my pauses I took double

the time. I caught a glimpse of the river between the trees, and in another ten paces I reached the end of the path.

Lady Melodé was not alone!

Not for a moment had I imagined that her object in seeking this secluded spot had been to keep an assignation. Yet palpably such had been the reason for her early retirement and clandestine exit from the house, for she was pacing the narrow strip of lawn in earnest conversation with a man whose means of reaching the spot were revealed by a boat which lay alongside the landing stage.

I had no desire to spy upon Lady Melodé, and I was about to retire by the path I had come, when the two of them, reaching the end of the lawn, turned, and I saw the face of her companion. I had no thought of retiring then, for I recognised her companion as d'Hautville. Four times I had met this man, and each time a fresh coil had been added to the chain of mystery by which I was surrounded. To my mind the time had come when it behooved me to act on my own account to obtain some information, and here at last was an opportunity too good to be missed. The spot was absolutely secluded, for no one was likely to be upon the river or the river bank at this time of the year, and, conscious of my own strength, I determined, if necessary, to force an explanation from d'Hautville's lips. There was an additional reason for remaining. Whatever was

the relationship existing between Lady Melodé and her companion, it was patent to me that they were not on amicable terms. I noted the scornful expression on Lady Melodé's face, the repellant curve of her figure, as the two of them came near to where I stood in the shadow of the trees. They did not come the full length of the lawn, but stopped by the landing stage. Their voices were low at first, and only broken words reached my ears, but it was evident that d'Hautville was urging Lady Melodé to some course which she was determinedly refusing.

Then he raised his voice. "You will do as I bid you, my Melodé. You will come when I send for you, if you do not make plans for your friends to receive me."

She turned away with a haughty little gesture of contempt, and was a couple of paces away from him before he seemed to realise that the interview was at an end. Then a spasm of rage disturbed the smooth serenity of his features, and, springing after her, he laid his hand on her arm.

"Voila!" he cried.

Lady Melodé made an effort to throw off his grip. I stepped out of the shadow and strode towards the pair. Each of them must have observed my presence at the same moment, for Lady Melodé uttered my name, and d'Hautville's hand dropped from her arm to his pocket.

"Mr. Hardinge?" repeated Lady Melodé, as I stopped a pace from her side.

"At your service," I answered, as quietly as I knew how, for my head was hot and my fingers itching to close with the man who faced me.

"Ah! The knight errant, always the knight errant," said the mocking voice of d'Hautville. "Come, my dear Melodé, surely it is the right time for you to tell him that he mistakes his object in life, and that for the future you have no need for his services."

I jammed down both brakes on my temper, and turned to her for the word which should set me at liberty to act. To my surprise, instead of resenting the familiar mode of address, something very like fear was written on her face as she glanced first at me and then at the Count.

"Tell him, Melodé," repeated the Count, "that we do not need his well-intentioned interference in our affairs any longer." He took a case from his pocket and nonchalantly busied himself in lighting a cigarette.

Then she spoke. "Mr. Hardinge," she commenced, and paused. "Mr. Hardinge, I do not know what brought you here at the moment when this—this gentleman"—she forced the word out—"and I were engaged in a purely private conversation, but I must ask you to leave us. What M. le Comte says is perfectly true. I do not need your

assistance any longer. You did me a service, as I thought, in the past, and for that I am grateful, but——"

I suppose I ought to have left her at this request, but nothing was further from my intention. I just put my hands deeply into my pockets lest they should slip unawares at the throat of the man grinning at my discomfiture, and then I replied: "I am quite ready to depart as soon as I have received an answer to each one of a few questions I propose to ask this gentleman. I consider that I am fortunate in having met him at a spot so favourably situated for a confidential chat." Then, having finished this speech, I passed by them and, stepping on to the landing stage, hauled in the boat and possessed myself of the sculls.

While so engaged I heard d'Hautville's voice muttering in a rapid undertone, and the moment I had finished, Lady Melodé came to me and laid her hand on my arm. "Listen to me, Mr. Hardinge," she said, beseechingly, "I may be foolish, but I imagine that your intention to remain here is prompted by the thought that I may be in some danger. Let me assure you that I am in none."

It was difficult to resist the pleading in her voice, the touch of her fingers, as she strove to draw me from the landing stage; but as the moonlight fell upon her upturned face I saw fear written in her eyes, and for her own sake I resisted her request.

"Lady Melodé," I answered, "I have been playing some part, though what that part is I do not know, in affairs which closely concern yourself. I admit that it was entirely of my own volition that I have become involved, but at the same time I am involved in them, and it is my right to have an explanation. I cannot demand that explanation from you. Chance has brought M. d'Hautville here to give it me."

"And if I refuse to answer your questions," interrupted d'Hautville.

"I shall be forced to the unpleasant necessity of wringing M. le Comte's neck," I replied, my anger for a moment over-riding my sense of what was due to Lady Melodé's presence.

"You see what sort of knight you have enlisted in your service," remarked d'Hautville, banteringly, though I remarked that his hand dropped again to his pocket, and I guessed that a pistol lay there handily. I was near enough to him to grip him before he could draw it on me, so I did not worry myself with the thought that he might fire from his pocket.

"Please," said Lady Melodé, but I made no movement.

"Bah!" ejaculated d'Hautville. "I cannot stay here all the night. Let it be as Mr. Hardinge wishes. Do you leave us together, my sweet Melodé. Since m'sieu is so insistent, he shall have as many explana-

tions as he desires, though I doubt that he wishes an answer to more than one question."

"No!" she cried. "I will not leave you together!"

I looked at her, and my heart misgave me, for it seemed to me that her fear was lest I should hear something concerning herself.

"M'sieu's whole deportment has made me aware of the chief question he desires to ask," said d'Hautville. "M'sieu is jealous of the exceedingly friendly relations which he has observed to exist between myself and the beautiful Lady Melodé. They so much resemble the ordinary relationships which obtain between the heads of households in his own favoured country, that he would fain be satisfied whether Lady Melodé Temple and M. le Comte d'Hautville are not in reality Le Comte and La Comtesse. Is it not so, m'sieu?"

I said nothing, and after a moment's pause he continued: "I am happy to set m'sieu's mind at ease. I have not the slightest legal right to control my dear Melodé's actions in any way whatsoever."

"That is fortunate for her," I muttered, though my heart grew sick at the interpretation which could be placed on his statement, when coupled with the familiarity of his references to Lady Melodé.

"Who can tell," he commented, sardonically, "how long it shall be so, for, as you have observed, our friendship is so great that we may even go the length of quarrelling."

Then a note of menace crept into his tone. "I have already advised m'sieu that I have his welfare at heart. May I repeat that if he values his safety he will no longer concern himself with myself or my Lady Melodé? Even if he should escape me, he need not hope to escape justice. A word is sufficient to ensure m'sieu's identification with that of the murderer of Lucille."

I had expected the renewal of this threat, and I was prepared for it. "I shall speak that word when I see the occasion for it," I remarked, coolly. "You best know what the result is likely to be."

My shot went home, for I saw his lips whiten. But his self-control did not desert him. "You are droll, m'sieu," he remarked.

"You see there are many matters to be explained," I said.

"Then assuredly you shall have such explanation as is suited to your intelligence," he drawled. Instinct warned me of his intention, and I saw his hand move in his pocket. I leaped past him as he pulled the trigger, and the bullet ricocheted from the surface of the water. I had him by the elbows before he could turn, and I propelled him forward on to the landing stage and over the edge, catching him by the heels as he went in. I dipped him thrice, and then, dragging him out, I bundled him into the boat, tossed the sculls after him, and set him adrift. I

felt thoroughly satisfied with myself as I returned to the bank.

"You are not hurt?" asked Lady Melodé. She was still standing at the same spot where she had stood when the brief struggle had commenced.

"Not in the slightest degree," I said. "Firing from the pocket requires a lot of practice."

"Thank God!" she said, almost hysterically.

"Come!" I said. "Let us be going home."

Without another word she laid her hand on my arm, and I noticed that she was trembling like the leaves of the aspen whose branches we passed beneath at that moment.

CHAPTER XVI

DISILLUSIONED

Lady Melodé's agitation was so great that I thought it inadvisable that we should return at once to the house, in case we might encounter some one by the way. I suggested that we should pace up and down the river lawn until she regained her self-control. Forty paces was the length of the sward from the boat house on the one side to the big willow tree on the other, for I counted twice. I had counted up to thirty the third time when my companion broke the silence.

"What did d'Hautville mean when he said that a word would be sufficient to ensure your identification with the murderer of Lucille?"

I stopped in my walk abruptly, and looked into my companion's face. Her brow was wrinkled, and she seemed to be striving to find an explanation for something which puzzled her.

"Then you have not heard that Lucille was found dead in the Seine?" I asked.

"Lucille? My maid?" she said, incredulously.

"Lucille Clement, the girl who brought me to the house on the Quai d'Auteuil," I replied.

"When—I do not understand, why—please tell me, for I have heard nothing," she said.

I told her all I knew of the matter, from my recognition of the body in the Morgue, to the threats which d'Hautville had uttered at our interview on Notre Dame. When I spoke of the latter she gave a little cry and her grasp tightened on my arm.

"I don't care that for his threats," I said, with a snap of my fingers. "I have no doubt that he has good reasons for saying nothing."

"You do not know him!" she cried.

"I know sufficient of him to be satisfied that he has more to fear than myself, if any enquiry should cause his name to be mentioned in connection with that poor girl's death," I answered.

"Of course, I cannot tell," she said, musingly, "but I hope you are not lulling yourself into a false sense of security. I know what that man is capable of doing, and after to-night he will not spare you if he has it in his power to do you any harm. Why—why did you let him escape?"

Her voice was tense, and I looked at her in surprise.

"No—no!" she continued. "I don't know what you will think of me, Mr. Hardinge. Only I could not help remembering that he had attempted to take your life, and you could not have been blamed if you had not pulled him out of the river. You do not know, perhaps, that he looks on you as one who

has come between himself and an object he has long had in view, for which he has been plotting carefully during the past two years."

"And that object?" I asked.

"He thought for a long time that I should marry him," she replied.

This amazing statement, amazing in view of my suspicions as to the relationship which had existed in the past between the two, left me speechless.

"He will not believe," she continued, "that I was not well acquainted with you long before that occasion when I first met you at Versailles. He has declared that he will remove you from his path."

"And was it in fear for me that you were so anxious that I should leave you?" said I, as a new light broke in upon my brain.

"I knew he was armed," she answered softly, "and yes, I did fear that he would take you at a disadvantage, and I—I could not bear the thought that all your kindness to me should be so repaid."

"Lady Melodé," I said earnestly, for whatever she had been in the past, I could see quite clearly that her interest in my welfare was not assumed, and I thought that the time had come at last when I could fairly ask for enlightenment on all the subjects which had been troubling me, "Lady Melodé, why will you not give me your full confidence? You may be assured that I will not abuse it."

"Not now," she said. "You have given me so

many things to think about. To-morrow—in the morning."

"You will promise to confide in me in the morning?" I asked.

She looked me frankly in the face. "I think in the morning," she said, "I may tell you part at least of a most unhappy story, which I had declared should be known to no one but those who are already acquainted with it. It was in order that I might tell you that story that I suggested to my cousin that he should bring you down here. When you came I hesitated until to-night. I thought it might not be necessary."

"And now you find that it is necessary?" I said.

"I am not sure now that I dare," she answered. "That is what I am trying to decide, and that is why I must ask you to wait until the morning. I am not thinking of myself. I have your safety in my hands."

I knew not what to understand by the contradictory speeches which fell from her lips. First she would, and then she would not. But anyhow, my peace of mind was more to me than my personal safety, and I told her so.

"Don't you think that I am capable of looking after myself?" I urged.

"In any straightforward business, yes," she answered. "D'Hautville has already experienced the results of a personal encounter. He will not attempt to meet you face to face again. When he strikes, it

will be by another hand, and what you have told me of poor Lucille makes the method he intends to adopt plain. He must have thought that I was aware of all the facts, and so should understand his hints when he—when to-night he offered me your life as the price of my consent to marry him."

"You refused!" I cried. "I am glad you refused. I would not accept my life, even if it were indeed at his mercy, on such condition."

"I refused," she said quietly, "not knowing what power for evil was in his hand."

"But there is none," I urged.

"Let us go indoors," she said, interrupting me. "I must have time to think things out."

Without a word I turned, and we mounted the path leading to the house. Her hand just rested lightly on my arm as she kept pace with me. And so, just as we reached the end of the wood, suddenly a nightingale, from a bough above our heads, burst into full-throated song. About us streamed the pure moonlight, weaving its intricate traceries of silver on the sprouting bracken beneath the trees, and flooding the open lawn which lay between us and the house. We stood and listened while the rich voice of the songster rose in full cadence and died away in plaintive minor tones. To me it was as the voice of the spirit of the night. I felt my companion's hand grasp my arm convulsively, and looking

down upon her face, I saw that it was drawn—the face of one hopeless.

"Lady Melodé," I said softly, "I will ask you to tell me nothing of the unhappy story you mentioned, but there is something I would ask of you."

She had veiled her face with her hands, and I continued: "I would ask you to give me the right to protect you from this time and henceforth."

She still made no reply, and I placed my hands on her shoulders and drew her towards me. "God knows how dearly I should value my trust," I said.

She did not withdraw from my hold, but her hands dropped to her side, and she looked me full in the face. "Ask me nothing," she answered. "It will be better for you." Her bosom rose and fell stormily, though her eyes were tearless. The nightingale once again burst into full song.

"Melodé! Lady Melodé," I said, "your rival there knows the truth of life and is singing his story out of the fulness of his heart. Will you not learn of him?"

"Not for me, not for me!" she cried, and, thrusting away my hands, she flitted away from me across the lawn and was lost in the house.

I did not follow. I stood there moonstruck for the best part of an hour, while the bird poured out his flood of song; stood there until I saw through the uncurtained windows the bridge players throw down their cards. Then I slipped quietly into the

house and found my way to my room. I did not regret the emotion to which I had been betrayed. I did not regret the offer I had made. I knew as well as mortal man can ever know, that I was beloved by the woman who had won my heart, and in that period of exaltation I told myself that whatever had happened in the past could make no difference.

In the morning the period of exaltation had passed and I shuddered at the thoughts of the damning nature of the evidence against the character of the woman I loved, though I hugged the hope that even yet some explanation would be forthcoming. I had been awake so long on the previous night that I had overslept my usual hour, and consequently, when I arrived downstairs about ten o'clock, I found the breakfast room deserted. However, I had not been there above a minute or two when Lady Melodé entered. She seemed to be suffering from nerves, although at the same time fighting against anything of the sort as she greeted me, and made some casual reference to the beauty of the morning. "The others have already gone out," she said, as she poured out my coffee. "I said that I would wait and bring you along to the river."

"I think we will manage to give them a good start," I remarked, my spirits rising.

She replied only with a rather wan smile, and I watched her, thinking how happy I should be if this breakfast *à deux* was to be the first of a long series.

Looking up, she caught my glance fixed upon her, and the colour came to her cheek as she remarked hastily: "There is a letter for you this morning, Mr. Hardinge."

"A letter!" I exclaimed. "I left no address for letters to be forwarded."

"Still, a letter arrived for you this morning," and rising, she crossed the room, and taking a large envelope from the sideboard, she brought it to me. The handwriting was unknown to me, and I laid it down with the remark that it might very well wait.

"I think it will be best for you to see the contents," she said, and her voice was rather strained. "I know the handwriting."

I tore open the envelope, and there, between two pieces of cardboard, was a photograph. One glance assured me that I had seen it before, or rather that I had seen an enlargement from the same negative, for it was a replica of the study I had seen last on the easel in the studio of the house near Fontainebleau.

"Whose was the handwriting?" I asked, aimlessly, for I knew only too well.

"D'Hautville's," replied Lady Melodé shortly.

Then I observed a sheet of notepaper still within the envelope, and I drew it out, though some seconds elapsed before I could read what was written upon it. Conceive, if possible, my thoughts as I read the following epistle:

MONSIEUR:

Mon admiration de votre galanterie doit être partagée, je le sais bien, par ma compagne d'hier soir. Mais c'est une de vos compatriotes, et vos compatriotes sont si modestes, si timides, si "shy" comme vous le dites, n'est-ce-pas, que je doute qu'elle ne vous laisse un souvenir de l'occasion. Ainsi je vous envoi la photographie ci-incluse, sachant bien que vous l'estimerez à haut prix. Peut être vous en aura-t-elle fait cadeau d'une copie, ou bien, hélas! aurez-vous déjà le privilege de pouvoir la comparer avec l'original. En tel cas je n'ai que la consolation de pouvoir garder le représentation de tant de beauté et je suis sûr que vous ne me jalouserez pas le pauvre petit bonheur de contempler ces reproductions si froides des charmes qui me sait maintenant perdues. Veuillez, Monsieur, agréer l'assurance de mes sentiments les plus distingués,

IVAN D'HAUTVILLE.

I read the letter twice, conscious all the while that Lady Melodé was watching the expression of my face. Mechanically I refolded the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and picked up the photograph, which had fallen face downwards on the table. A word arrested my further action.

"Mr. Hardinge——"

"Yes," I answered.

"That—that letter concerns me?" Lady Melodé's eyes were bent downwards, and she spoke nervously.

"Intimately," I answered, with a scorn I could not suppress.

"Then I have a right to see it," she asserted.

A wave of anger swept over me, and impelled me to the performance of one of the most caddish actions of which I have ever been guilty. I do not seek to defend myself. I was cad enough to hand to her the letter I had just read. And while she read it in turn I compared her face with the photograph in my hand. Feature by feature they were the same. Upon the finger of the outstretched hand, too, was the ring which I was still wearing. Yet even as I gazed a new hope took possession of me. Lady Melodé laid the letter upon the table.

"And the souvenir?" she asked.

I hesitated. She looked me in the face now, and if ever truth and purity were written on a woman's face, they were limned upon hers.

"A photograph merely," I answered.

"You will let me see it," she said, as I still hesitated. "I beg of you, Mr. Hardinge," and leaning forward she took the photograph from my hand.

I made an effort to recover it, but I was too late. As her eyes rested on the accursed thing a wave of crimson flooded her face, and, receding, left her with the pallor of death.

Then I spoke, though my words but ill expressed

my emotions. "Lady Melodé," I said, "tell me that d'Hautville's suggestion is false. Tell me that this photograph lies. I only ask your word. I am anxious to believe you. I know that that man has some power over you—but—I only ask your word."

She was silent.

"Lady Melodé," I urged, "one word is enough."

She made as if she would speak. Then the tears gathered in her eyes. She rose swiftly and hurried away from the room, the crystal tear-drops breaking through her fingers as she held them to hide her face.

Until that moment I had not realised how strong had been my hopes that the evidence which condemned her in my eyes could be explained away. Her attitude left me hopeless.

CHAPTER XVII

THE REBIRTH OF HOPE

How I managed to get through the rest of that Sunday is not quite clear to me to-day. I know I saw nothing more of Lady Melodé, and I was profoundly thankful when night came and I realised that I should not meet her again. Now that she was aware of what I knew concerning her, I could well understand that the sight of me could not be otherwise than distasteful to her, unless she wished me to take d'Hautville's place, and in that regard—well, Duxworth had declared that I had not a particle of shame in my composition, but I do not think I could ever have brought myself to carry on an intrigue such as my thoughts foreshadowed under the roof-tree of the Duxworths. Besides, there was a further reason for flight. Lady Melodé's attitude seemed to denote that she had repented of the past, and I feared lest in the impulse of my passion I should also declare that I could forget, even while knowing that no man can bury for all time the knowledge which has once passed into his brain. Better, I decided, to take my heartache away with me than deliberately enshrine such a skeleton in my cupboard.

I rose early on Monday morning, after a sleepless night. I breakfasted alone, for I had made my excuses to Mrs. Duxworth on the previous night—saying, quite truthfully, that the letter I had received on the Sunday morning had made my return to town at the earliest possible moment on Monday morning imperative, and by eight o'clock I was on my way back to town.

The morning was bitterly cold. During the night the wind had gone round to the east. The country which on the previous day had been palpitating with life had fallen to stillness. The birds were silent, the budding leaves seemed shrivelled. Spring had departed from the face of the earth, even as it had departed from my heart.

Clearing the town, I put in my highest gear and rushed into the teeth of the wind, finding solace in the bitterness of the blast. The dust foamed up behind as I flew along with nothing to bar my progress. I had covered half a dozen miles in about ten minutes, when a dust cloud ahead told me that I was not the only motorist early awheel, and the hope took me that fate might have another meeting with d'Hautville in store for me. I picked up my leader rapidly, but I soon saw that it was not the white car which had hung on behind us from Nettlebed, but a blue car again. Even as I recognised the car I was past, but not so rapidly but that I recognised the driver, and saw her signal me to stop.

I was in flight in order to prevent the possibility of such a meeting, but at that signal my intentions vanished. So while in one breath I cursed my folly, and in another thanked the devil for my luck, I cut out the engine and put on the brakes.

The blue car pulled up behind my Napier, and dismounting, I went towards the Mercèdés. But as I came level and recognised Lady Melodé sitting quite calmly at the wheel, the thought came to me that when she had signalled me to stop she had not recognised me, but had stopped me for some assistance, under the impression that I was a stranger. So I merely enquired coldly, as I raised my cap, whether I could be of any assistance.

I knew by her attitude as I asked the question that she had stopped me deliberately, and before she answered me I had leisure to wonder why she had taken such peculiar means for obtaining an interview when she could have said anything she liked to me in the breakfast room of the Duxworths' house.

At length she lifted her veil and spoke to me. "Mr. Hardinge," she said, "yesterday morning you asked me a question to which I did not reply."

"There is no reason why you should answer it, Lady Melodé." I strove to speak unconcernedly.

"There is a reason why I should answer it," she cried, passionately, "even as there is a reason why I should keep silent. But I cannot keep silent any longer. I cannot! The sacrifice is too great!"

At these words, spite of all I knew or thought, I knew my heart leaped up again in hope. "That photograph—that letter—they both lied?" I asked.

"That letter was a lie. That photograph was not of myself. How could you? How dared you think that I——"

"How could I think otherwise?" I asked in astonishment. "There cannot be two women so beautiful known to one man——"

She interrupted me. "But merely on d'Hautville's word," she said.

"Not that alone," I replied. "I have been at the house where you stopped on Christmas night. I have been in the studio——"

"You must not believe your eyes," she said. "That is not the photograph of myself."

"Then who——" I began.

"You must not ask me," she answered.

My hopes withered again. I stood a moment in silence, then I turned to depart. I was in no mood to be made the sport of a woman of such sort.

"You do not believe me?" she cried. "You do not believe me?"

"I have not said so," I answered, cruelly.

"Why should you believe me?" she asked, helplessly, while the tears gathered in her eyes. The sight of her tears moved me as they had moved me before. "Lady Melodé," I said, "it is the one wish of my heart to believe you, but you will not allow

me to do so. I want to be of service to you, but as we stand at present, I may, blundering along in the dark, do you some irreparable mischief. You know I have learned much since I bade you farewell on Southampton platform."

"What have you learned?" she asked, breathlessly.

"I have learned sufficient to tell me that you need some one to protect you," I answered, and, carried away by my emotion, I added: "Melodé, won't you give me the right to do so?"

"No, thinking of me as you do——" she whispered. "I want no protector, Mr. Hardinge," she said, and her voice was scornful and cold.

"If—if—you would only promise to become my wife," I blurted out.

She looked me full in the face, and her eyes were like stars swimming in mist. "You will break my heart," she said. "How could I become your wife while such photographs as those you have seen are in existence?"

"Then you care?" I said, inconsequently, and catching her hand I pressed it to my lips.

She looked at me strangely. "Before I answer another question," she replied, "tell me everything you have learned."

While she gazed at me frankly I did not dare recapitulate all the damning evidence which had come into my possession. "There is no necessity," I said, all my doubts in full flight again. "The past

is there." I pointed to the road we had traversed. "One can never retrace life's highway."

"Tell me," she insisted.

In her presence it seemed desecration even to hint at the knowledge I had gained, but there was no way out of it, and haltingly I told her of all I had seen in the house of the photographs. She listened intently, and when I had ended my tale she remarked simply: "I am glad you destroyed them. I did not know they were in that house, or I should have made an end of them myself."

I wondered greatly whether she was wanting in some moral sense that she could refer so quietly to the matter. In fact, every word she spoke seemed to make of her character a greater enigma.

"You see I have destroyed the negatives," she continued calmly. "They were in the box that my companion brought away with her on that Christmas night."

I rubbed my eyes in a puzzled sort of way, and I suppose she must have read something of my thoughts in my face, for she added:

"You do believe that I never posed for those horrible prints?"

"Yes," I answered. "When I am in your presence I cannot help believing your word; but when you are absent I cannot get away from my doubts. I cannot find any explanation, and it sends me mad to think about the question at all."

"Can you imagine how I feel," she replied, "now I know that you have seen them, especially——" She paused, and plucked an envelope from some place of concealment within her coat. "Imagine yourself to be a woman who receives a letter like this."

I took the letter from her hand.

"My sweet Melodé," I read, "I am sending by this same post a souvenir to your impulsive young knight. See that he receives it, or you may depend upon my fulfilling my promise to distribute many similar souvenirs amongst your friends. It will probably save me any further trouble in putting an end to his calf love; but that is as may be. In any event, you deserve a little punishment, my dear lady, for all the trouble you have caused me, though it is nothing to what you may expect if you fail to comply with my wishes. Ever your IVAN."

I made no comment on this. There was only one comment I could have made, and d'Hautville was not present.

"Until I saw the photograph he sent you, I had not the slightest idea that any of those photographs could ever be taken for me. What am I to do? I thought that all the negatives were destroyed, and it appears that the worst of them is still in his possession."

"If that is all that troubles you," I cried, "I will obtain it."

"But how?" she asked.

I pondered a while, but could think of no plan, so I remarked: "At present I see no way out of the difficulty. Perhaps an idea will come to me later. Meanwhile, I have not told you all that I have learned. I have not told you that I know the story of the ring you gave me?"

"The ring?" she queried. There was so much astonishment expressed in her tone that I was momentarily convinced that she was unaware of the history attached to it.

"Yes," I answered. "Meredith Mervyn is a friend of mine, and he recognised it."

"Meredith Mervyn!" she gasped, as the colour faded from her face and her hands dropped limply to her side.

For a moment I thought that she had fainted, but she was not of such weak material. She pulled herself together, though it was with a trembling voice that she said: "You will excuse me, Mr. Hardinge, I must be returning to Marlow."

Even now, though my hopes, having been raised sky-high, were once again dashed to the ground, I could not let her depart. If she were to leave me now I knew that I should never see her again.

"I hope you will not think, Lady Melodé," I said,

"that I sought this information. Only by the purest accident did it come into my possession."

"I can never think of you otherwise than as instinctively honourable," she replied wearily. "It is fate which will not allow anything to remain hidden."

"That story shall never be revealed," I declared.

"I doubt it," she replied. "Good-bye, and thank you."

She held out her hand to me, and I took it in mine. The pressure of her fingers thrilled me, and I forgot all my determination to avoid her for the future. I cannot recall the actual words I used, but I know I blundered headlong in an attempt to express my thoughts. I told her that I knew of one way of dropping a curtain upon the past. That in a new land, and amid fresh scenes, all disagreeable reminiscences would be forgotten. I begged that I might be allowed to take her away, and promised her that as my wife the thought of Mervyn nor of d'Hautville should not be allowed to trouble her.

Something very like a smile brightened her face as she listened.

"You would still marry me, Mr. Hardinge?" she asked. "You would marry a woman who played with an honest man's love in order to betray him into the hands of a despicable lover? You would marry a woman of whose shame you have had the most terrible proofs?"

"No more!" I cried, for I could not listen to such a self-condemnation. "That woman is dead. The past is dead. Whatever happened in the dead past can make no difference to the fact that I love you now."

There was a smile on her lips and a light in her eyes that I had not expected, as I made my declaration. Leaning towards me, she laid her two hands lightly on my shoulders and looked me straight in the face.

"My dear," she said softly, "do you know that you have been labouring under a great mistake?"

"Then for God's sake make it plain to me!" I cried.

"You seem to have been under the impression that I am Lady Molly Temple," she said gravely. "For her sake I had hoped that no one knew that she was still living; for her sake, and not for my own, though she is my sister."

"What a fool I have been, what a fool—I beg you to pardon me, I——" Never could any man have been more overwhelmed with shame than myself.

"I can easily see how you were misled if, knowing my sister's most unhappy story, you saw me on terms of apparent intimacy with d'Hautville, and——"

"I cannot excuse myself," I interrupted. "I ought to have known it was impossible for you——"

"Hush!" said Lady Melodé. "If you blame yourself I shall be compelled to take a portion of the

blame on my own shoulders for not having confided the whole story to you at first. But you can understand how any one would shrink from telling it to anybody. But you shall know everything very soon now. Can you trust me for a little while longer—Geoffrey?"

"For all time, if it pleases you," I answered.

"I shall not keep you waiting for so long as that," she replied, "but it is a long story, and I must be returning to Marlow."

"I will return, too," I said, eagerly.

"I hardly think——" she began. "It would be awkward to explain to auntie and the others just at present. I am not taking any one else into my confidence, and none of them know that Molly is still alive, you see."

"Then when shall I see you again?" I asked.

"I did think of going to see the trials in the Isle of Man," she reflected. "Now please start my engine."

I obeyed, somewhat mutinously. Then when the engine was running I mounted the step and held out my hand to bid her farewell. She took it, and as she bent towards me our lips met.

A moment later I stood in the road as the Mercèdés glided away, and a soft good-bye floated softly to my ears upon the wind.

When in my turn I started my car, the bite had gone out of the east wind.

CHAPTER XVIII

A WILD IDEA

I CAN recall absolutely nothing of the rest of my journey back to town. My car travelled on air. Just when the future looked black as night, when I saw no solution to the mystery which enveloped the woman I loved, save one which would have left her bereft of all purity and honour, a simple word of explanation had cleared up everything. It is true that I had only my Lady Melodé's word for the truth of that explanation, but it was quite enough for me. I would have backed my belief in the truth of that word against the whole world. I knew I should win, for if ever truth is made visible in human eyes, it was made manifest when she had assured me that I had been labouring under a great mistake. Of course, there were a number of puzzling circumstances, but I did not worry over them, since I had received the assurance that they would be soon made clear to me.

Then from the thoughts of my good fortune I began to wonder what I could do to prevent further annoyance from that unprincipled rascal d'Hautville. I was not going to allow him, if I could prevent him,

to carry out his threat of distributing copies of that photograph amongst Lady Melodé's friends; but I could not see how I was to acquire the negative, together with any other prints from it which might still be in his possession.

I had the photograph still in my pocket, and I took it out, with the intention of destroying it, when I saw that it was a fresh print. There could be no mistake on the point. When I had opened the envelope the photograph had appeared to be just an ordinary finished print; but now I observed that one corner had escaped the fixing process and was responding to the action of the light. The only inference to be drawn from the fact was that d'Hautville carried the negative about with him, and if I was to obtain possession of it, I must first find out his present whereabouts. Here my memory came to my aid. When, after d'Hautville's departure from the Duxworths' landing stage, my explanation with Lady Melodé had commenced, I remembered her telling me that her enemy had made the appointment I had broken in upon, by means of a note delivered by the chauffeur of the white car which had overtaken us on the return journey from Oxford, while the Count had himself been in the white car at the time. I had only to close my eyes to recall the picture of the white car passing me on the road, and my memory was sufficiently vivid to record the letters and number on the back plate.

I had put up my car, and had returned to my chambers, when this line of investigation occurred to me. I did not, however, follow out my first impulse and start forthwith to make enquiries on my own account, for just then Coles came to report himself and to ask instructions, and the thought occurred to me that he was far better qualified to make enquiries without exciting remark than myself. So I explained to him exactly what I desired to be ascertained, and with his customary "Very good, sir," he went away on his errand. There was nothing else for me to do but await the result of his investigations, so I strolled down to the club to lunch and to kill time afterwards in the smoking-room. My efforts in this direction were not very successful, and when five o'clock arrived, without Coles having returned, I began to curse him for his dilatoriness. I did him an injustice, however, for when he did make his appearance I found that he had been far more successful than I had for a moment anticipated.

"It wasn't a difficult job, sir," he explained modestly. "I knew the letters on the car you told me about were those of ———" (he mentioned the name of a well-known firm) "and I thought stranger things had happened than my finding some one I knew in their show. I wasn't far wrong, for when I got to the shop, the first chap I met was little Billy Watts, who was cleaner at my first shop in Long Acre. Then, to make things easier, the

very same white car you spoke about was standing in the garage ready to go out. Count Doveel had hired it, Billy said, and I soon got out of him where the Count was hanging out. Then as the car was just going down to the hotel for him and Billy was driving it, I got him to give me a lift. So off we went. Billy dropped me in the Strand and I hung about until I saw the Count come out of the courtyard in the car, and then I thought I might find out something about him at the hotel. "I'm afraid I took rather a long time about it, sir," he apologised, "but you said you wanted to know what sort of style he was living in, and there's no way of doing so except by seeing for one's self. So I drifted round to the servants' quarters, knowing the way pretty well through putting up there on previous occasions, and I soon found out as the gent has a first-class suite on the second floor, and is looked on as quite a toff."

"Did you get his number?" I asked.

"Number 59," Coles answered promptly. "I saw that for myself. You see, sir," he continued, "I spun a yarn that I was out of a job and had heard that the Count wanted a chauffeur and persuaded one of the maids to go and see if he was in. I told her that I had a note of introduction which was quite good enough to fix me up if it only got into his own hands, and what with me promising to take her out for a ride on her next Sunday out, and one

thing and another, I got her to take me up, me to wait in the corridor while she took the note in."

"But you had no note of introduction," I said.

"Knowing that he was out," said Coles, "I wrote the note myself. Anyway, the girl took me up. There was no need to get the keys from the service room, for the door was unlocked, and when she went in I stood at the door and looked after her. There was precious little to be seen. The Count's man and a chap from ———'s" (mentioning the name of a well-known costumer) "were unpacking a parcel between them and the maid fetched me in to speak to them. I told them my story, and the Count's man told me that, so far as he knew, the Count didn't want a chauffeur, and some one must have been having me on. However, I asked if I might be able to see him to-night. He said it was likely, as his boss was dining out and going on to the special ball at Covent Garden afterwards, the parcel he was unpacking being the costume which had just come home. So there being nothing else to do, I came away, saying I wouldn't trouble any of them any further."

This communication of Coles set me thinking. If he had been so successful in penetrating d'Hautville's apartment on one occasion, why should he not do so a second time? I knew I could trust to his fidelity, and, if supplied with adequate funds, there might be a chance of persuading the chambermaid

who had already befriended him, or of bribing the valet to obtain the negative and any prints from it which might be in d'Hautville's possession. Or, failing to obtain them, he might be able to ascertain exactly where they were. The idea of taking any one into my confidence, however, was not a pleasant one, and still less did I like the thought of exposing any one else to the risk of being charged with theft. So, thanking Coles heartily for the thorough manner in which he had carried out his enquiry, I dismissed him and returned to the smoking-room to fully digest the information he had obtained. I paused at the door, for at that moment there came an idea into my brain, one of those seemingly insane ideas which come at times to every man, and which when carried out are occasionally successful from their very daring.

Without waiting to think it out I turned in my tracks, obtained my hat and coat, and getting a cab at the door, drove straight away to the costumer who, as Coles had told me, had provided the disguise for d'Hautville to wear that evening. Arriving at my destination, I found the principal overwhelmed in business, but I managed to get a personal interview with him, and, explaining to him that I was desirous of playing a practical joke upon an acquaintance, I asked him whether he would find it possible in the time at his command to rig me out in a disguise which would enable me to pass myself

off as d'Hautville. I had some difficulty in persuading him to comply with my desire, but ultimately, upon my assuring him that money was no object to me, he undertook to do his best. I left him in order to dine, after making an appointment at his establishment at 11 P.M. for the purpose of being made up.

I am quite willing to confess now that the idea which had taken possession of my brain was just about as mad as any that could have originated in the minds of any of the residents at Colney Hatch. I thought that if I were disguised as d'Hautville I might be able to gain entrance to his rooms at his hotel and see for myself whether the negative I sought was hidden there. It was only after arranging for the disguise that I began to realise the difficulties in my way. Quite possibly I might be sufficiently disguised to pass muster under a casual scrutiny, and, so far as height was concerned, there was only an inch or so between the two of us. But when I came to think out the details my hopes of success seemed infinitesimal. I should have to obtain the key of his room from the hotel bureau, and, even if facially I should escape detection, my voice was so vastly different from d'Hautville's, both in timbre and quality, that the difference would almost certainly be noticed.

Besides, he would leave the hotel in an overcoat, and one could not count on the possibility of his

wearing a garment that would be identical with mine. The more I pondered the matter, the more absurd did my idea appear to be, and before I had finished my dinner I was half inclined to telephone to the costumer to countermand my order. Only one thought restrained me. I was curious to know what d'Hautville was doing at Covent Garden, and there was a bare possibility that, habited as himself, I might learn something regarding himself or his associates which might be of service to me in the future. So I kept my appointment and found my costume all ready, and the costumer prepared to put the finishing touches when I had donned the dress.

The costume was not an elaborate one. D'Hautville had chosen to go to the ball as a purely conventional devil, in black silk tights, shirt and tail, with the usual headgear, including the customary feather, so that there was no difficulty over the provision of this part of the disguise. But these properties were only accessories. My real disguise was undertaken by the costumer himself when with wig and paint he set to work to deprive me of my identity. In the course of half an hour he wrought a wondrous transformation in my appearance. I was astounded when, the operation being completed, I viewed myself in the glass. I even looked over my shoulder to see whether d'Hautville had not entered the room, for it seemed to me that the reflection confronting me in the mirror was his.

"It is superb," I said to the costumer. "I even mistook myself for the Count."

"I study all my customers," he replied modestly. "I might even transform M. le Comte d'Hautville into a replica of Mr. Hardinge."

The suggestion gave me pause. "I hope you will do nothing of the sort," I remarked.

"Is he likely to desire me to do so?" asked the man.

"I don't suppose so," I answered; then I continued, as the thought occurred to me that it would be just as well that I should provide against any enquiries that might be made, "If Count d'Hautville should ask whether you know who has been personating him, I hope you will not give me away."

Immediately suspicion flashed into his eyes. "The Count is a friend, I think you said, sir?" he asked.

"A rival would be a more correct way of putting it," I replied.

"If I thought that you desired to use my art," he said, with a magnificent wave of his hand, "for anything but a friendly joke, it would be my duty to inform M. le Comte d'Hautville."

"Listen," I replied. "You know nothing of me, it is true——"

"If I am right in thinking that Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge is the well-known automobilist——"

"Well, well," I interrupted.

"Since automobilism is my one recreation," he

answered, "I may say that the name of Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge is not unknown to me."

"Then I hope you know enough of me to be assured that I would do nothing that was not sporting," I said.

"If I had not been perfectly assured on the point, sir, I should not have carried out your suggestion. I should, for instance, have refused to disguise Count D'Hautville as yourself."

"Then you know something of the Count?" I asked.

"I know that he will probably be one of your rivals in the race for the Amateur Cup," he replied, "that is, if each of you reach the final, and having heard of his reputation I should have suspected that he had some nefarious object in view if he had wished to pass himself off as yourself."

"But he has the reputation of being a good sportsman," I objected.

"That depends where you enquire concerning him," he replied. "I have many customers in Paris who are always in pursuit of the butterfly pleasure, and they talk—they talk. Many of them have talked to me of M. le Comte d'Hautville."

"Then I may depend upon you as a brother automobilist?" I asked.

"I shall be at the ball to-night," he answered, "and if the Count asks me anything, I suppose I had better deny all knowledge of you?"

"If you can stretch your conscience to such an extent," I replied, "you may do me a service which I shall hardly know how to repay."

"You may depend upon me," he replied seriously.

I shook him heartily by the hand and then I looked round for my coat. The costumer produced a Franciscan habit. "The Count's dress," he said, "is intended to illustrate the proverb 'When the devil is sick the devil a monk would be, when the devil is well the devil a monk would he.' So he has provided for both characters."

I, too, donned the habit. "I do not know," I mused aloud, "whether the devil himself would not feel less uncomfortable in the habit of St. Francis than d'Hautville."

"The habit is easily slipped off," said the costumer slyly.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE GUISE OF THE DEVIL

MIDNIGHT was striking as, fixing my hat firmly on my head, I stepped into the cab which I had kept at the door.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I'm drivin' another gent," said the cabby through the trap as I sank back on the seat.

"No, it's the same gent, though in different clothes. Covent Garden," I said.

"Well, I will be d——d," I heard the man remark as he dropped the trap, and a few minutes later the cab pulled up at the theatre entrance. People were just beginning to arrive, so I left the cab and walked past the string of waiting vehicles and entered amongst a party. I went at once to the cloak room, deposited my coat and set out in search of my double. I was quite confident that my disguise would not be penetrated, so I had no hesitation in walking about quite freely.

The floor was rapidly filling, but not so thickly that it was easy to see that there was no devil dancing, and a hurried stroll through the promenades

and corridors convinced me that, as had been my intention, I had arrived before d'Hautville, unless he was hidden away in one of the private boxes. I pulled the cowl of my habit over my head and returned to the vestibule, where I lit a cigarette and placed myself in a convenient position to watch the arrivals.

The stream of new-comers was continuous, as the restaurants closed, and I waited with what patience I might for d'Hautville's appearance. My patience was not severely taxed. I had just lighted my second smoke when he entered, accompanied by a couple of other men, one obviously a foreigner and the other just as obviously an Englishman, but both of them unknown to me. D'Hautville wore a big fur-lined coat with a heavy sable collar, and the impossibility of my attempting to pass myself off for him at the hotel was immediately apparent to me, for I had brought with me a coat of Irish frieze. He did not glance in my direction, but turned at once towards the cloak room. I followed the party, rather annoyed at the sudden dishing of my hopes, but intending to have another glance at the faces of his companions. I saw them enter the cloak room and I placed myself in a little niche where I should be able to observe them plainly as they came out.

They soon got rid of their wraps and reappeared chatting gaily. But I did not bestow the attention I proposed upon the faces of d'Hautville's compan-

ions. Chance had been more than kind to me throughout, but now the goddess dealt me the ace of trumps, for even as he came through the door a piece of paper which I recognised as the cloak room voucher fluttered from his habit to the floor. I watched it eagerly, but until the party had passed out of sight I dared make no movement to obtain the prize. Those few moments of waiting were longer than all the preceding hours of the day had been, but my opportunity came at last, and I could have shouted with exultation when my fingers closed upon the ticket.

Holding the piece of paper in my hand, I went straight upstairs to the refreshment buffet, and choosing a secluded corner I ordered coffee and a liqueur. The moment that piece of paper had fluttered to the ground I had determined upon the course of action to pursue, if fate were kind enough to enable me to pursue it. First, I would wait for a short time, and as it would be advisable that d'Hautville should have no idea that he had a double present at the ball, I had of necessity to keep out of the way. Once he saw me, I knew that he was astute enough to realise intention in the disguise, and I did not want to increase the risks attendant upon carrying out the rest of my programme. I succeeded in my object, for not a single person came near me, and when a couple of dances had passed and the band struck up for a third I went downstairs again.

I gave one glance at the auditorium, and was glad to see d'Hautville engaged in a waltz. My way was clear. I went to the cloak room, quite calmly produced the voucher d'Hautville had dropped, and without a word allowed the attendant to help me on with it. My heart was in my mouth as I walked down the passage and into the vestibule.

"I shall be back in half an hour," I said to the commissionaire as I slipped half a crown into his hand.

"Very good, my lord," he replied to the sable collar, which I had turned up round my neck.

Then I jumped into a hansom which had just set down another arrival and gave the address of d'Hautville's hotel. A couple of minutes—a long couple of minutes, during the passage of which I saw myself in the dock of a police court answering to a charge of stealing a valuable fur coat—elapsed, and the cab rattled into the courtyard of the hotel. I thrust my hands into the pockets of the coat in an endeavour to simulate a nonchalance I did not feel and my fingers closed on a key. I drew it out. Again fortune had dealt me a trump card. If the key was that of d'Hautville's suite I should have no further difficulties to face.

Telling the cabman to wait, I entered the hotel, and going straight to the lift gave the order to the attendant, muffling my voice in my coat collar. He obeyed without a word, and when I stepped out of

the elevator I went straight to d'Hautville's rooms, the position of which Coles had clearly explained to me. My hand trembled a little as I inserted the key in the lock, but the key turned. Switching on the electric light, I closed the door behind me. So far I had been successful.

Nor did my success end with my burglarious entry. With the door fastened behind me, I knew I should be safe for a short time at all events, and I determined to make a methodical search of his apartments, commencing with the bedroom. There is no need for me to go into details regarding my search. It is sufficient for me to say that my object was attained, for quite early I discovered the negative tucked away in a bag, which was not even locked. It was in a little wooden box with half a dozen others, none of which was of any interest to me, though I examined them all carefully. I still wished to assure myself that there were no prints from the negative in d'Hautville's possession, and on this point I was also soon satisfied, for in the same bag I came across a little roll of half a dozen, and, wrapping them up with the negative in a piece of newspaper which was lying on the table, I secured them in a pocket of the habit I was wearing, and not thinking it worth while to encounter any further risks, I switched off the light and left.

My nervousness had entirely left me when I had closed the door behind me. I strolled leisurely down

the stairs and nodded to the porter at the entrance. I had not been challenged by a single person. I drove back to Covent Garden. I redeposited the coat in the cloak room and I re-entered the ball-room exactly at 1.30, to find d'Hautville, even as he had been when last my eyes had rested on him, engaged in a waltz.

Now having so far achieved my object, wisdom would have dictated the first opportunity of escaping. But I was so elated with the result of my enterprise that I could not resist the temptation to follow my luck through and to remain at the ball on the off-chance of discovering something concerning the Count and his companions.

My luck held true. As the dance ended I was standing near one of the exits in the shadow when d'Hautville passed me. He had doffed the habit for dancing, and made a very pretty figure of a devil, for he was slim, and the black silk tights and smalls set off his figure to advantage. I did not attract his notice as he passed with his companion towards the lounge. I let him get well ahead, and was about to follow him, when I felt a pull at my sleeve, and a voice whispered in my ear, "The lady has arrived, M. le Comte. She is in No. 4 on the first tier."

I made no movement. I was too astonished to do so, for I had forgotten for the moment that I was in effect d'Hautville. I glanced at the speaker,

and as I gave him a nod of comprehension he passed on and mingled with the throng in the promenade. I had recognised him as one of the men who had accompanied d'Hautville upon his arrival at the ball. Clearly he had been watching for the arrival of somebody, and had only missed by a few seconds announcing the arrival to the right person. But how to make use of the information? I had not long to decide. Sooner or later the man would discover that there were two devils in monk's clothing present, and then my opportunity of discovering anything would be gone.

Even as I considered the best course to adopt, my feet were committing me to definite action. They carried me up the stairs, and almost before I realised what I was about I found myself rapping at the door of No. 4.

There was no waiting, no time to draw back, for immediately I knocked the door opened and I was compelled to enter. I did so automatically. I was silent, for I had no word to say, nor was a word said to me in greeting. But had I been overflowing with speech I should have been frozen dumb. The occupant of the box was a lady. She was alone, and, despite the domino which concealed her form, and the mask which hid her face, I seemed to recognise her. If the events of the evening had not turned my brain, I believed that I was again face to face with Lady Melodé. I seemed to see all the super-

structure of hope I had built up upon my interview with her that morning crumbling to dust. What could she be doing at Covent Garden at two in the morning with d'Hautville?

I forgot my disguise. I did not for a moment imagine that the woman seated before me in the bright light while I stood in the shadow would recognise d'Hautville in me, and in a voice which was husky with emotion I said, "I am here to take you away. You must come with me. You have nothing to fear. You——"

A laugh interrupted my outburst—a cold, bitter laugh that chilled me. Then the lady spoke. "Excellent, M. le Comte," she said. "Excellent, if you were only certain to whom you are speaking."

The voice was Melodé's voice, but it was different. To my ear it sounded older, harsher—my Lady Melodé's voice with the music going out of it. It continued: "It is a pity that so much excellent emotion should be wasted, M. le Comte, on one who knows so well how much value to place upon it. As a histrionic effort it really would do credit to the gentleman you represent to-night."

As she spoke, my doubts had been crystallising into certainties. This was not my Lady Melodé, but Lady Molly Temple. The next words which fell from her lips proved it.

"You did not expect to meet me here, but at the same time I should have thought that you could

have spared me one word of welcome. I know that I am but a poor substitute for my sister, but really M. le Comte, you must appraise your fascinations at an extraordinary value if you imagined that she would keep the appointment. What? Have you nothing to say? I have not known your speech to desert you before."

I muttered something unintelligible, and at the same moment there came a knock at the door. There was only one thing to do.

"I think, madam," I said, "that I am the victim of an unfortunate mistake. The message which brought me to this box must have been intended for some one else."

My voice in its natural tone wrought an immediate change in the manner of her speech. She rose from her seat, and holding the mask close to her face, looked closely into mine.

"You are not M. le Comte d'Hautville?" she asked.

"Heaven forbid," I answered piously, and I opened the door of the box in obedience to a second summons.

As I anticipated, d'Hautville himself entered, and as his gaze rested on me I could have laughed at the amazement expressed therein.

"Is it that there are two of me?" he asked.

"Impossible," I replied lightly.

"Then will you please to inform me why you are

here?" he said with a burst of anger which set his r's rolling like the burr of a 60-horse car on the level.

"I am afraid you must blame my unfortunate likeness to yourself, sir, and the fact that I have hit upon a similar costume," I replied, "together with the fact that I also had an appointment. For the intrusion may I hope to be forgiven?"

Then with a bow I vanished, though not until I had dropped on the floor the cloak room voucher for d'Hautville's coat.

CHAPTER XX

GOLDEN DAYS

I HAD observed a puzzled look in d'Hautville's eyes while I was speaking, as if he was struggling to recognise my voice. But he clearly had not done so when I departed, and I thought the best way of putting him entirely off the scent as to my identity would be to act as if my appearance in the box had indeed been due to the accident I had declared it to be.

I hastened down the stairs and blundered into a couple of girls engaged in fixing up a torn flounce. I apologised for my clumsiness.

"The only apology I can accept is the next dance," said one of them saucily.

I proffered the apology, and the band striking up, I threw my habit on to a seat and we joined the waltzers. My partner waltzed perfectly and, to my satisfaction, was quite content to dance without being talked to the whole time. While we whirled round I managed to keep my eye on the box, and before the dance was over I saw d'Hautville and his companion rise to leave. Pleading the heat, I took

my partner into the vestibule, which we reached just as the two I was watching passed through the doors. D'Hautville was cool and smiling. The lady still had on her mask, but from her attitude I judged that whatever had passed between them had not been provocative of friendly feeling. Indeed, when he would have assisted her into a brougham in waiting, she thrust his hand aside and took no notice of him when he waved his hand in farewell.

All the while my partner was chattering to me and I was answering in monosyllables, so that I was not altogether surprised when, telling me that I was an intolerably stupid devil, she betook herself in search of some more entertaining companion.

D'Hautville passed me at the moment and half paused as if he would speak, but, changing his mind, he passed me towards the cloak room. A minute later he reappeared muffled in his fur coat and passed out of the house. I had not anticipated his leaving so early and was unprepared for this move. I could not very well follow him in the garb I was wearing without exciting attention, yet I had no intention of letting him get out of my sight, so I rushed off to the cloak room, and as soon as I had obtained my coat and hat I followed. Of course he had disappeared, so I jumped into a cab and bade the driver take me down the Strand. There were very few people about, and half way to his hotel I

saw d'Hautville walking quietly along. We drove past him, and fifty yards beyond the hotel I stopped my cab. He entered his hotel. I waited a couple of minutes, and as he did not make his appearance again, I gave my address to the driver and went home myself.

Late as was the hour when I reached my chambers, I did not turn in until I had pieced together all that had happened to me that eventful day. My cogitations may be briefly summarised. First, I had Lady Melodé's declaration that I had been labouring under a great mistake when I had identified her as the original of the photographs I had seen. In the morning I had only her word for it, but now I had seen her sister, and though the opportunity I had to look at her masked face was very brief, I could see that a few years previously she would have almost exactly resembled Lady Melodé. There was confirmation, too, in the remarks which had been addressed to me under the supposition that I was d'Hautville, of Lady Melodé's statement that, after ruining the life of the elder sister, he was now striving to get the younger one into his power. Well, he would have to reckon with me there, I thought. Even with this amount of knowledge in my possession, there were a number of puzzling facts to account for, but they were not enough to keep me awake, and ultimately I went to bed with a lighter heart than I had known for months past. It was

pleasant also to think that I had succeeded so easily in the enterprise I had set myself to perform. I locked the negative and the prints from it which I had taken from d'Hautville's room carefully away, and when I awoke in the morning it was with a delightful sense of having scored heavily off my opponent.

I have said the morning, but it was long past noon when I awakened, and Coles looked at me reproachfully when he brought in my breakfast. I knew that he was pitying me for spending any portion of such a brilliant spring day in bed. I soon made him happy by telling him that if my new racing car was in trim I proposed to take the road en route for the Isle of Man via Holyhead. This was a couple of days earlier than I had intended to start, but I was impatient to see Lady Melodé again, and as she had not stated on what day she proposed going over, I thought that I would be there at the earliest possible moment, so that I should not miss an hour more than I could help of her society.

My decision was confirmed when later in the afternoon I met Duxworth at the club. He informed me that Lady Melodé, with his mother and sister, had that very morning started on a leisurely tour northwards on their way to the same destination. I offered him a seat on my car, for I knew Coles would not mind riding with his feet on the

footboard, but he told me that London had superior attractions.

So, early the next morning, Coles and I started alone. I chose a route by which I hoped to overtake Lady Melodé by some happy chance. But in this hope I was disappointed, and though we overhauled numbers of cars on the road, not one of them contained the passengers I desired to see.

At Liverpool, which I reached on the afternoon of the second day, I stopped for the night, and arranged for the transport of my car to the island on the following morning. I had been immensely pleased by the way she had behaved. Of course, I had been unable to let her go at anything like her full speed, but the way in which she took the hills without a single complaint was a proof of her abilities, and I expected confidently that the car would turn out to be a real flier. In fact, barring accidents, I realised that I stood a very good chance of inclusion in the British team for the race.

Coles was quite certain on the point. He had been quite enthusiastic on the subject of Napier motors, and when we looked over the machinery together to see how the parts had stood the journey, he could barely find words to express his admiration. Hardly a nut wanted tightening, so truly had the parts been fitted and so accurately had they been put together.

Our passage to the island the next morning was

a calm one, and we landed at Douglas in the most cheerful of spirits. I looked out anxiously for any signs of Lady Melodé, but neither she nor any of the Duxworths were visible, nor did their names appear in the visitors' list, so I judged that after all I had arrived before them.

I did not remain in Douglas, for I had already secured my rooms at an hotel more convenient to the starting place, and we were comfortably ensconced there that same night.

We were both up half an hour before dawn the next morning to make a preliminary circuit of the course before any traffic should be about and to obtain some idea of the difficulties we should be called upon to negotiate. We were not the first upon the road, for a good number of cars had already turned up, and when we returned to our hotel for breakfast there was quite an assemblage to see the racers come in. Lady Melodé was not present, so when the boat was due I ran down to Douglas to see if she would arrive that day. I had miscalculated the time of the boat's arrival, for she was lying alongside the pier when I made my appearance, and the passengers were streaming past me by the time I reached the pier gates. But I saw the one figure I sought. I had no eyes for any one else. I was hardly conscious that she was not alone as I sprang from my seat and hastened to welcome her, and I fancy Mrs. Duxworth must have been more than a

little astonished at the warmth of my greeting to her niece, seeing that when we had met at Marlow there had still been the constraint of casual visitors between us.

I was only recalled to a sense of my surroundings by the elderly lady's voice as she remarked, "What have I done that I should be so completely forgotten, Mr. Hardinge?"

I turned to her with a confused apology for my rudeness, and gathered from a twinkle in her eye that she was more amused than annoyed at the frank exhibition I had made of the state of my feelings. However, I made amends by looking after the luggage of the whole party and afterwards taking them to their hotel.

Then commenced a most delightful time for me. I am not going to dwell upon the details of my life during the next fortnight. A very brief summary of one day's doings will suffice. Regularly at four A.M. I turned out for a run over the course at racing speed. Morning after morning I saw the sun rise under perfect conditions, a quite sufficient compensation for the extra energy required to drag one from bed at so early an hour. At seven I returned to the hotel for breakfast with an appetite sharpened by the keen salt air I had breathed. There is no appetiser in the world like it, and I will warrant that a three-hour motor run before breakfast will cure nearly every ill to which man is heir—save, perhaps, a

tendency to embonpoint. After breakfast the car had to be overhauled. There was always some slight betterment or experiment to be tried, and for the rest of the day the staff of mechanics who had come over to look after the car were busily employed under Coles' supervision in carrying out the minor improvements which suggested themselves to us. I ought, I suppose, to have looked after these details myself, but I knew [illegible] could be trusted. The winning of th[illegible] that moment the most important t[illegible]orld to him, while to me it was of mere[illegible]ondary interest. So I devoted the remainder of each day to my Lady Melodé. I became an inseparable unit of the Duxworth party. I was welcome, I knew, though even if my greeting on their arrival had not given me away, my conduct during the succeeding days would inevitably have done so.

We had glorious rides and walks in the sweeping uplands, golden in the spring garb of the gorse and the broom. The intoxication of spring was in the air and it was in our blood too. It was no time for morbid thoughts, at least to my mind, and not many days had passed before I had again made the avowal that under such circumstances it would have been natural for any man to make. The brightest day of all was when my—yes, "my"—Lady Melodé confessed that she returned my love.

The occasion was this. The first time I found

myself alone with her I handed to her a little packet containing the negative and prints. "In fulfilment of my promise," I remarked.

In some wonderment she opened the packet, and when she realised of what the contents consisted, her amazement became greater.

"Where did you get them? I don't understand," she said.

I gave a full history of my adventures after I had parted from her on the Marlow road until the time I returned to my chambers on the night of the Covent Garden ball, and I was amply repaid for all the risks I had incurred by sight of the delight on her face as she pounded the negative to fragments with a big stone and tore the prints into tiny pieces that the wind scattered far and wide over the heather.

"There goes the only reason which prevents you saying yes to my request," I said exultingly.

"What request?" She pretended not to understand. But I was not loth to ask the question again, and it was then that she placed her hands in mine and spoke the words I had so thirsted to hear.

It was a little later that I besought her to consent to the announcement of our engagement, but this she denied me.

"Not yet, Geoffrey," she said, and my name on her lips was the sweetest music I had ever listened to. "It is not time for that yet. But soon—one day

not far distant now—when you have heard the whole of the story I have to tell and all danger is past."

"My dear," I said, "I know enough of the story you were at such pains to conceal, and as for any danger coming through d'Hautville, have I not beaten him every time?"

"You know much, Geoffrey," she said, "but you do not know everything. I would tell you the whole unhappy story now only—I don't want to remember it. For years it has been my one thought how to get poor Molly out of the hands of that man, and now I have succeeded I want to be rid of all thoughts of it for awhile. The matter has haunted me until it has become an obsession. But here I have felt at last that I have done with it. You can wait a little longer for full details. You can trust me, Geoffrey?"

Could I trust her? I would have trusted her with my soul, and I said so.

"Then we will not spoil these golden days with memories," she said. I fell in with her desire, though I knew her argument was fallacious, for if anything relieves a man or a woman's mind upon any subject of troublesome thought it is the chatting it over with a friend who is worthy of confidence. I did hint that this would be the best for her, but I did not press the matter, and so the past was not mentioned between us.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ELIMINATING TRIALS

DURING the whole of those happy days in the Isle of Man, only one little difference of opinion arose between us, though that was so slight that it was hardly worth dignifying with the name of a difference. This was with reference to my entry for the Amateur Cup. Lady Melodé, instead of being as I had expected, keen on my winning my trial, showed but a lukewarm interest in my chances.

The day before that set for the race I rallied her upon her indifference, and to my surprise she confessed to a hope that I should be eliminated from the finals. I suppose my face must have declared how hurt I felt, for she hastened to explain.

"It is not because I want to see you beaten, Geoffrey, though I am not sure that defeat would not be useful if it modified the very excellent conceit you have of yourself. No, you must not—you will ruffle my hair and auntie will say things. You know that I would like you to win everything you desire in life from a pot to——"

"To a wife!" I interjected, as she paused for a suitable simile.

"Silly!" she answered. "You know that there is only one woman you could win."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because I am certain that there could not be two women in the world silly enough to marry you," she replied, saucily. "But that is not the real reason. I am rather dreading your returning to France."

"You have surely no fear of d'Hautville left?" I asked.

"It isn't exactly fear—though, yes, Geoffrey, it is fear. Fear lest he should manage to do you some harm. You have beaten him at every point, and he is not likely to take his defeat lying down. Over here he might find it difficult to do anything, but in France——"

"In France the innocent man is safe, if not safer, than in this country," I said, thinking of the charge he had threatened to bring against me.

"I cannot think that his threats were meaningless," she continued. "It would be horrible to think that you should even be arrested on a charge of murder."

"I don't think there is the least likelihood of that happening," I declared. "I am quite certain in my own mind that d'Hautville was only bluffing. Depend upon it, that he has the strongest reasons why there should be no further enquiry into the death of poor Lucille. It would be quite easy to prove that he was left alone in that house with her."

"It may be that you are right," she replied doubtfully, and there the matter dropped for a time.

The conversation made me think, however. I had been so delightfully occupied since I had arrived at the island that I had not once considered the matter, but now I deliberated very seriously as to whether it would not be the best to let the race go to some other competitor. Not on my own account. I had no fear of d'Hautville now, but if he did take any such action as Lady Melodé had suggested, there was at least a chance of the whole story she had striven so hard to conceal being told to the world. While the current of my thoughts ran in this channel I remembered what Melodé had remarked concerning my conceit, and I perceived that she had pretty good grounds for bringing the charge against me. Here was I so cock-sure of being selected as one of the team that I was seriously considering withdrawal before the trials took place. It was counting my chickens before they were hatched with a vengeance. It was a revelation of a side of my character I had hardly known to exist, and with a new-born modesty I determined to postpone the decision as to withdrawal until it was settled whether I should have any option in the matter. After all, there were a number of good reasons why I should not be called upon to compete in the race in the shape of the fifteen competitors I had tc meet in the trials, and when I came to consider the

matter, they were just as likely to eliminate me as I was to eliminate any of them.

I explained this point of view to Melodé on the morning of the trials about five minutes before I was due to start. She laughed and declared that I was a sorry humbug. I suppose I was humbugging myself all the time, for when I took my seat and gripped the wheel I felt as if nothing could stop me, and the determination to get every ounce out of my car was as irresistible as ever I had found it on previous occasions.

I made an excellent start. The car took off with the smoothness of skates upon ice, and we glided up the hill at Quarter Bridge to the deep baying of our exhaust with an ease which thrilled me with delight. Nor was my delight lessened by the behaviour of the car over the first two laps. As every automobilist knows, the island course, with its many sharp corners and few straight stretches where lost time can be made up, is not an ideal racing track, and when my own rough timing between the controls showed me that I had averaged just an hour and a quarter for each of the two rounds, I began to feel still more certain that I should be in the final. I had further grounds for the belief, inasmuch as I had already passed four of the cars which had started before me, while I had not been passed myself.

This confidence came near to bringing about my

undoing. I knew my car could cut a bit off the time I had hitherto been rounding the circuit in, and the third time, just out of Ramsey, on the Snaefell road, I began to push her. Here the surface, owing to the long spell of dry weather, and the considerable amount of traffic which had passed over it during the past few days, had become pretty rough, and we went bumping over the ground in a way that made me cling to the steering wheel for dear life. One bigger bump than usual bounced me out of my seat and momentarily lost me control of the car. Luckily I got hold of the wheel within a second, but, during that second, the car swerved viciously for a wall, and as I brought it round I heard the grit of the off fore wheels against the stone. I moderated my pace a bit then, but hearing Coles shouting in my ear that another car was closing in upon me from behind, I let my car go again, quite forgetting that the most ticklish turn in the whole course, the hairpin corner, where the Ramsey and Douglas roads divide, was not more than half a mile distant. Consequently I came to the spot at a speed I had never intended, and, being on the turn before I knew, I was compelled to take it as widely as possible. Even then I only got round by the skin of my teeth. We slithered round in a scrambling, hap-hazard fashion that nearly flung Coles out on to the road and made me uncertain whether the car was not going to turn over bodily. Fortunately the surface was good at

the turn, and a bad skid was the only result of my carelessness, if I except the fact that my time for the lap was only a minute over the hour.

I learned before I started on the fourth lap that I was well within the times of my competitors, so that I decided to take no more risks. Thus, for the rest of the fourth and sixth rounds, I might have been touring as one would tour on roads free of traffic and unpatrolled by the county constabulary. The result was that I finished without having found it necessary to stop once for repairs and without having met with a single accident, an experience so unusual that I naturally thought the performance was not likely to be bettered by more than two of my opponents.

My confidence in my car was justified by the judges' decision, and before I turned in that night I had the satisfaction of knowing that I had been selected as a member of the team which was to make the attempt to bring the Amateur Cup over to England.

Of course Melodé was the first person whom I made acquainted with the decision, and I was just a little anxious as to whether she would not desire me to forego the contest, but to my unfeigned delight she did nothing of the sort. I told her that I was glad that she had come round to my opinion as to the slightness of any danger accruing to me from d'Hautville's enmity.

"No, it is not that," she said. "I am as certain as ever that he will attempt to do you some injury—but if you do not give him an opportunity soon, he may wait until later, when you might be less prepared to meet him. It seems to me to be better for you to give him an opportunity soon, rather than wait and let him strike you when you have become careless."

I laughed. "You really still think he is to be feared?" I asked lightly.

"I am as certain that he will attempt to be revenged as I am of my own existence," she answered earnestly. "I only wish I could learn how and when he intends to play for his revenge. I know enough of him to be assured that, sooner or later, it might be to-morrow, or it might be twenty years hence, he will make an attempt to get even with you, Geoffrey. He will never forget the blow you dealt him at the house on the Quai d'Auteuil, he will never forgive the ducking in the river, even if he could have managed to forget and forgive the way in which you have, as he thinks, come between himself and—me."

"Well, he will find me ready for him," I answered light-heartedly.

"You will be careful, Geoffrey," she continued earnestly. "There is nothing he would stick at. When he learns who is engaged in the race I dread to think of the dangers which may await you."

"Time enough to think of dangers when they are visible," I said. "A motor race gives precious little opportunity for any calculated attempt to injure any individual competitor. Besides, there is a chance that he may be one of the selected French team, so that we may meet again as rivals."

"Still, you will promise me that you will take no extra risks?" she pleaded.

I promised, and the bargain was sealed then and there. Then I went to inform Coles of our luck.

I found him in the building where the car was housed, oiled up to his ears, a grin half way round his face and a bunch of cotton waste in his hand.

"Bet you ten to two we pinch that Amateur Cup, sir," he said. "I've been over every bearing and nut, and the car's as sound as a bell."

"So long as no one meddles with her I think we stand a fair chance of pulling it off," I assented.

"I'll see to that," he replied, and he went straightway to work again, whistling "Rule, Britannia," the while, horribly out of tune.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PLOT THICKENS

THREE days later I stood by my Lady Melodé's side on the deck, as the boat by which we were returning steamed out of Douglas harbour. I think we both looked back regretfully on the dimming hilltops. I know I did, and I said to my companion, "Thank heaven no one can rob me of the memory of the happy days I have passed there."

"Have they been so delightful?" she murmured.

"The happiest of my life," I said, with a fervour that brought an additional colour to her cheek as she whispered, "Hush!"

Thereafter we watched in silence while the island faded away from our sight, and when the last hill had disappeared, and going forward we could just see the outlines of the English coast, she sighed lightly and asked, "What of the future, Geoffrey?"

"We will meet that together," I replied, and for answer I had a glance which made me chafe that the boat was crowded with passengers.

My plans for the immediate future were all made. The day after the trials Coles had departed with the

racing car. He had my instructions to see it thoroughly overhauled in the Napier factory, and with the two mechanics who had acted as his assistants to proceed afterwards to Royat. There I was to join him for the tuning-up process. As I had already been over the Auvergne circuit several times, I thought that if I arrived a fortnight before the race I should be in ample time to refresh my memory. That would give me a week in town and several days of the companionship of Melodé.

I tried to persuade the whole party to come on to Royat for the race, but Mrs. Duxworth declared that the journey would be far too fatiguing for her to undertake, and Melodé insisted that her presence would only be an additional menace to my safety. By this time, though no announcement of any kind had been made, my position towards Melodé was pretty well understood, and, indeed, towards the end of the visit we had been markedly left to our own devices.

It was a great wrench for me to leave the party at Liverpool, but they had their touring car with them, while I was returning to town by rail. So, after accepting an invitation to lunch at Claridge's a couple of days later, I was obliged to tear myself away. I felt quite lost, too, when I returned to my chambers. The rooms looked gloomy and depressing, so I dressed hurriedly and went out in search of a more cheerful atmosphere, telling myself the

while that I would divest myself of bachelorhood at the earliest possible moment.

The dining-room at the club was pretty full, and I was looking round for a seat, when I observed Mervyn in his usual place, and at once made my way towards him.

"The very man I desired to see," I said, as I came behind him.

He jumped to his feet at the sound of my voice and remarked, "You have taken the words out of my mouth, Hardinge."

"Then you have something to tell me?" I asked, as I seated myself opposite him. "I also have a story to relate."

"Mine will keep," he said. "You shall have first innings."

"We will argue the point while we dine," I replied.

"I suppose you have seen the results of the French eliminating trials?" he asked.

"No," I answered, "I haven't seen this evening's papers."

"Then you will be interested to learn that our friend is one of the competitors selected to represent France in the race," said Mervyn.

"What! D'Hautville?" I queried.

"None other, and he made the best time over the course of all the Frenchmen," continued my friend.

"By Jove!" I said, "matters are getting exciting. I will give you two to one I beat him, though."

"You will never lift that pot if d'Hautville can prevent you by fair means or foul," he said decidedly.

"I'll do my best, anyway," I replied.

"I should strongly advise you against the attempt," he added.

"Oh, bosh!" I said. "I have come off best so far in every encounter I have had with him, and am quite ready to try another fall."

"All the more reason for not chancing another meeting," replied Mervyn. "Indeed," he continued, "speaking seriously, and in the light of what I have been able to discover, I should think it is as much as your liberty, or perhaps your life, is worth to show your face in Paris at the present moment."

"Tell that to the marines," I replied confidently.

"I will tell the reason to you after dinner," he said, laughing, "as I do not want to spoil your appetite, though I have heard that the appetite of a motorist is destroyed by nothing but food."

"I thought you could only be chaffing," I replied, and fell to my meal with avidity.

But when, half an hour later, we were comfortably ensconced in a corner of the smoking-room, with our coffee and cigars before us, he remarked, "I was not chaffing you just now, Hardinge, when I declared that there is a considerable element of danger

attendant on your visiting Paris. You will soon see that for yourself when I have told you my story."

"Fire away," I said resignedly.

He nodded. "I'll not weary you with all the steps I have taken to obtain my information, but you may rely upon its substantial accuracy. Some of it, of course, I have picked up here and there, but some of the most important items come from a source which is absolutely reliable."

"And that source?" I asked with curiosity.

"You will learn in good time," he answered. "First, then, I made some enquiries about the house of the photographs. I found, as I anticipated, that it had been taken by d'Hautville about a couple of years ago, and that it had been occupied by a lady whom I had no difficulty in identifying as—the lady who presented you with that ring, which I am still surprised to see you wearing."

"You will not be surprised when you have heard my story," I replied gaily, "but go on."

"Perhaps not. It would be difficult to surprise me with the story of anything wherein she was concerned," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Anyway, the woman who lived there was undoubtedly d'Hautville's mistress, and just as undoubtedly she left the house suddenly on Christmas night, and from that day forth has not been seen again. I have made every endeavour to trace her, but without the slightest success, so that if you are dependent upon

her for proof of your whereabouts on that night, unless you have obtained some knowledge of where she has hidden herself, you are trusting to a very slender chance."

I said nothing, reserving myself for the time when I should be able to put all his theories to flight.

"Amongst other places where I sought for information," he continued, "was the house on the Quai d'Auteuil. The very suite of apartments which you visited was vacant, as it happened, and I took them for awhile, and so managed to learn all that the concierge knew. Those people will always chatter. Not that there was much to learn. Lucille Clement had taken the rooms, and save herself and one other no one else was observed to enter them."

"And that one?" I enquired eagerly.

"The concierge was able to give me a pretty accurate description of his dress," said Mervyn drily. "He was clad in a grey tweed overcoat and cap of the same material, and on the day after Christmas day he came to the house in a red motor-car."

"Why, there alone is sufficient evidence to exonerate me," I said.

"Wait a minute," replied Mervyn. "What sort of clothes were you wearing in Paris when you were motoring?"

"A heavy tweed coat and cap of the same colour, it is true," I answered; "but what of it?"

"And your car was red?" he asked.

"Certainly," I replied, "but there can be no difficulty in proving that the car was not mine."

"We shall see," said Mervyn. "On the day after Christmas a man driving a red car called for Lucille. She left with him and returned with him again the same night. The car was taken charge of by a chauffeur, who had accompanied the two, and the owner remained behind. The following morning the concierge was surprised to find the door of the flat open, and on entering she was horrified to find the place in confusion and blood stains spattered about. She immediately called in the police."

"I think that the fact that Lucille was seen at the place the day after I had left is sufficient for me," I remarked. "On that day I was crossing the Channel."

"With the woman who gave you that ring. A woman whose word, even if you could venture to call her as a witness, would not be believed by any person in his senses."

A wave of anger surged up in my mind, but it subsided as quickly as it had arisen. Mervyn did not know all that I knew now. He was still labouring under the impression that Lady Melodé was Lady Molly Temple, and he had reason for his bitterness.

"Don't be too hasty in your judgments, old fellow," I remarked. "I know that the lady who accompanied me was not the Miss Molly Temple you

knew. Did you never hear that she had a sister named Moira?"

"Moira? Little Morrie?" he questioned. "Little Morrie is a child."

"In ten years a child may grow up," I said. "Little Morrie, now better known to her friends as Lady Melodé Temple, is, I think, twenty-two years of age."

"I had forgotten," he said, as he passed his hand across his forehead. "I have always thought of her"—he referred to Molly and not to Moira—"as she was on the day when I last saw her. And it was her sister whom you assisted?"

"I will tell you all I have learned," I said, "when your story is finished."

He was silent for the space of a minute, and the collection of his thoughts was an evident effort. "I think I have told you all that I heard at the house on the Quai. When that information was in my possession, I sought out an old friend at the Embassy and obtained through him an introduction to a member of the detective force, the very one, in fact, who had been charged with the elucidation of the mystery. From him I learned that the newspaper accounts of the evidence regarding the identity of the man who met the girl at the Quatz' Arts was substantially accurate. You know all about that, so there is no need for me to go over the details again, but it is quite obvious that the only reason why you

have not been arrested is because up to the present no one has suggested that Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge, who was at the time staying at the Grand Hotel, could be identified as the man who met Lucille Clement."

"Still," I objected, "as the evidence of a man being seen with the girl the day after I had left Paris is indisputable, and I can obtain plenty of evidence that I was in Havre and Southampton on that day, I have a perfect alibi."

"At the time you could have proved it without a doubt," replied Mervyn. "But this occurred three months or more ago. I saw the importance of your being able to obtain the evidence you require. I began at the Grand. The night attendant who was there at Christmas time has disappeared. I went to Havre. In the hotel book there is no record of your stay there, and, though the proprietor remembers a gentleman arriving early one morning and leaving a car with him, he cannot state definitely whether it was on the 26th, 27th, or 28th. Another point, he is quite sure that the gentleman who left the car was accompanied by his chauffeur. On this particular your boatman is also assured and, further, he also is as hazy as to the dates as the hotel proprietor."

"The Southampton people would know, at all events," I said.

"The man at Southampton would be a countryman of yours, and his evidence would be dis-

counted," said Mervyn. "No, I am certain you are in danger, for I fancy that some one has been on your track already, suggesting dates, with the express object of making use later of the evidence thus manufactured. Mind, I do not think that the evidence against you is strong enough to get you convicted, but it is enough to cover you in a cloud of suspicion from which you would never completely emerge. So if you value your reputation, Hardinge, I should advise you to keep clear of d'Hautville."

"When you have heard all I have to tell," I replied, "you may come to another conclusion," and with that I straightway told him all that I had learned during his absence.

When I reached the conclusion, Mervyn remarked, "I can only wonder that the rascal has not put the police on to you before."

"I am with you," I answered, "to a certain extent. I can explain his hesitation upon one supposition only."

"And that is——?" asked Mervyn.

"That there is some evidence in existence connecting himself definitely with the crime, evidence that he cannot make away with."

"Maybe you are right," he replied.

"Sure of it," I answered. "In any case, I am not going to allow myself to be bluffed by all the d'Hautvilles in the world. He is much more likely to make

some attempt to injure me if he sees that I shirk the issue."

"That's good sense," Mervyn agreed, and with his commendation our conference ended that night with a promise of renewal in the morning.

CHAPTER XXIII

MY LADY MELODÉ'S STORY

THE renewal of my discussion with Mervyn led to no change in my decision, but it did lead to the proffering of a request from my friend which I had never anticipated he would make.

He had questioned me very closely as to what had become of Lady Molly, and had even blamed me for not having discovered her residence when I had met her at Covent Garden. I told him that it was not my business, and that I should undoubtedly be made acquainted with it in time from Lady Melodé, though I added that I was not sure whether I should not be better pleased if I never heard of her again.

"I understand," said Mervyn. "If I were in your position I have no doubt that I should feel exactly as you do, but——. Look here, old fellow, I want you to do me a favour. I want you to find out Molly's address for me."

I was astonished at the request, and said so. "What in the world do you want it for?" I asked. "It can be of no advantage to you. You cannot think of seeing her again after the way she treated you."

He looked at me strangely. Then he burst out: "I do want to see her again, Hardinge. You must help me."

"But——" I began.

He stopped me. "No, I know everything you can urge. The reasons why I should never see her again are unanswerable. They are as present to me this moment as they have been ever since the day when I knew that I had been betrayed. And yet—and yet—though every day of these long years I have told myself that she is dead to me, yet I must see her again. Let me put it to you how you might have felt had Lady Melodé——"

"Impossible!" I cried.

"So I thought," he continued, sadly. "But I do not want to discuss possibilities. All I know is that I want to see Molly again, to have speech with her. Why, I hardly know myself. It is simply an instinctive desire which, since I have learned from you that she is here in London, has overmastered me."

His earnestness affected me to such an extent that I promised him that I would do my best to bring about the interview he desired, and it was with this mission thrust upon me that I kept the luncheon engagement which had been made when I parted from Melodé at Liverpool.

The opportunity came when, luncheon being over, I suggested a little run out of town to tea. Both

Mrs. Duxworth and her daughter pleaded a previous engagement, and Lady Melodé suggested instead of the drive a stroll in the park, and inasmuch as the latter would give much greater chance of a talk, I was only too glad to fall in with the suggestion. No sooner were we alone together than I told Melodé of Mervyn's request.

"It would be better that he should not see her," she said, after consideration.

"Exactly what I told him," I replied.

"I think he will realise that himself when he knows more of her present circumstances," she continued. "You must tell him exactly the position of affairs, but to do so you must first be made acquainted with them yourself. I think, Geoffrey, it is quite time that you heard the whole unhappy story."

"I shall be pleased, if you think so," I answered.

"It is not a story one likes to tell," she said quietly, "but it is a story you must know, even if the result was to be a complete severance between us in the future."

"Nothing could bring that about," I said warmly.

"Wait until you have heard what I have to tell you. You have not seen Molly, or perhaps you would understand what I mean."

"You forget the meeting in the box at Covent Garden," I said.

"No," she answered. "I have not forgotten.

There was more than one instance of mistaken identity at the ball that night."

"I give it up," I replied.

"It was myself, myself disguised as Molly, who mistook you for d'Hautville that night."

I could only gasp in my bewilderment.

"You will understand the reason directly, but let me tell you everything from the beginning. In the first place all Mr. Mervyn has told you concerning Molly's engagement to him is correct. She had made d'Hautville's acquaintance during her first London season. Our father was in India, and I was at school at the time. Nobody knew much about d'Hautville, and when people began to couple Molly's name with his, her chaperone grew alarmed, and in order to put an end to gossip arranged that she should join our father in India, where she would be out of the Count's way. The plan had the opposite effect. In the autumn Molly sailed. D'Hautville was in England at the time, and was seen about for several days after she had sailed from London. Then he announced that he was returning to Paris. In reality he joined the same boat at Brindisi under an assumed name, and on the voyage no doubt managed to complete the fascination he undoubtedly exercised over her. Whether he remained in India all the time my sister was there, I am not certain, but I think so; and I think, too, his object from the first was to make use of her to obtain information for the

government which employed him. I expect at first he intended to try to obtain information which might be in our father's possession, and later, when he learned that Mr. Mervyn had fallen in love with her, he saw a still better way of carrying out his mission."

"It is almost incredible that an English lady——" I began.

"Still more incredible that an Irish girl could do such a thing," said Melodé, "except that—well, I don't know, but sometimes a woman would do anything for a man who persuades her that he loves her, and I am sure that at the time d'Hautville dominated her actions completely. Poor Molly, she has paid dearly for her folly. There seems to be no degradation d'Hautville has not inflicted upon her. When, on landing at Brindisi on the return journey, she asked him to fulfil his promise to marry her, he laughed at her; and when, awakened at last to his true character, she would have rejoined the boat, he threatened to reveal to the British Government the fact that she had obtained official secrets for a Russian agent."

I muttered some appropriate expressions low down in my throat, so that the comment must have sounded more like the growl of an angry dog than aught else.

"From that day forth her life must have been one of complete misery. He has always kept the

same threat hanging over her head, and though she grew to loathe the very sight of him, to hate the sound of his voice, or even of his footstep, yet her fear kept her in complete subservience to him."

"Those photographs?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "You will understand later."

I growled again.

"I wonder that I ever managed to get her out of his clutches," she continued.

"I wonder you ever took it into your head to make the attempt," I interjected.

"She was my sister," said Melodé simply, "and I could not bear to think—I knew nothing of the story until two years ago. I knew that there had been some trouble, but I was never told what it was until my father's death. I do not think that he ever recovered from the shock her action caused him, for he never settled down afterwards. He was always on the move from one quarter of the globe to another, and I saw very little of him. I think he feared lest he should grow fond of me—he had been devoted to Molly—and that I should falsify his trust as she did. One consequence was that I was allowed to do pretty much as I liked, and thus when my father died I was in Paris at the time. I had gone there with two old schoolfellows. They were artists, and I was pretending to be one. Oh, yes, we had a chaperone, dear old thing! She was never

in the way, and the three of us were inseparable, so that she was not really necessary. Well, I first heard Molly's story from the solicitor who came over to tell me of my father's death, for he thought it best to explain to me how it was that I inherited all his fortune. I heard, too, from him that so far as he knew Molly was still alive. Do you know, Geoffrey, that up to that time I had led a perfectly irresponsible existence, but then my life changed completely. Everybody wanted me to come back to England and be presented, and all that sort of thing, but I refused. I said that I was so interested in my art work that I would not leave it, but in reality I had determined to see whether I could not find out something as to Molly's fate, and I knew I should have more freedom in Paris than in England. Besides, I had heard d'Hautville's name mentioned, and that was the only clue I had to work upon."

"It was hardly a girl's work," I could not help remarking.

"I am sure no one else would have done anything but persuade me from doing anything at all," said Melodé decisively, "and I did not want to be worried with even the best meant advice on the subject. So I stayed in Paris, and I soon learned that d'Hautville was of some importance in the motoring world. Clearly, therefore, if I was to learn anything about him my best plan was to become an automobilist myself."

"You went to work pretty thoroughly," I remarked.

"I could not very well go about asking strangers questions about him," she said. "Anyhow, my plan was successful. On the occasion of my very first lesson in the Bois he was pointed out to me, and by the time I had gained sufficient confidence in my car to drive alone, I had seen him sufficiently often to recognise him or any of his cars. After that it was easy for me to discover where he lived, though not for a long, long while could I ascertain whether my sister was still alive. She never left the house, and it was only by careful enquiry that I learned that there was"—she hesitated a little, and her voice was low-toned and sorrowful as she continued—"that there was a mad Englishwoman living at the Comte d'Hautville's residence."

"Mad?" I asked. The information stunned me.

"Yes," she answered. "That is why I bade you wait, Geoffrey, before you asked me to marry you. Who knows that there is not some mental instability in all of us, though so far as I can learn it has never before made itself manifest in our family."

"There's pretty little mental instability about you," I answered bluntly, "and if that is the only reason why you have stood out against the announcement of our engagement, I think I shall take upon myself the responsibility of telling everybody from to-day."

"Then you are not afraid? All my actions must have seemed so extraordinary that I wonder you did not think I was mad from the moment we first met."

"If we are to be judged by our actions, I think I must be considered the madder of the two," I answered. "But so far as your sister is concerned, it seems pretty clear to me that shame, remorse, and heaven knows what ill-treatment, may not have broken down her mental balance. Is she—very—bad?" I asked, lamely.

"I doubt if she will ever completely recover," said Melodé sadly. "She is not dangerous. She has only a complete aversion to seeing people, now coupled with one fixed delusion. But of that you shall learn for yourself. Possibly you are right as to the reasons which brought about her condition, for at first she was in absolute terror of d'Hautville, and he must have behaved abominably in order to have induced so much fear in her. But to return to him. When I had satisfied myself that Molly was alive, chance led to my meeting d'Hautville himself. It was at a friend's house, but the details are of no importance. You may have gathered that he is just about as vain as he is needy."

"I guessed at the vanity," I replied, "but on the other point I have not troubled to enquire."

"He was undeniably startled when he saw me, and he hastened to get an introduction, probably to

discover whether I knew anything of my sister's story. My attitude apparently satisfied him that I was ignorant of the whole affair, and learning, in all probability, that I had a desirable dot, he possibly imagined that he would be able to fascinate one sister as completely as he had the other."

Again I could only give inarticulate expression to the rage eating at my heart.

"Listen quietly, please," said Melodé, and she laid her hand on my arm. "D'Hautville can play the part of a very polished gentleman when he pleases, and he did his best to produce a good impression upon me. I did not discourage him, for though this was a complication I had not foreseen, I thought it would be advantageous to know something of his movements. Well, no sooner had he made my acquaintance than I learned that he had furnished that little house on the borders of Fontainebleau and installed Molly there, with only one servant to take charge of her. Evidently his object had been to remove any possibility of my meeting her. But his action in reality made matters easier for me. The servant hated the loneliness of the place, and I found it easy to bribe her. Things were going on swimmingly when my hand was forced. D'Hautville thought the time had come to make me a proposal of marriage. I was so angered that I could no longer hide my real feelings, though I was wise enough to assume ignorance of Molly's whereabouts, and to

demand from him that I should be informed where she was to be found."

"And yet he has dared to face you again?" I asked.

"Dared?" she replied. "He laughed in my face at my denunciation. He told me that I was a foolish child, and that it would not be very long before I should be thankful if he renewed his offer."

"If I had only known that when I dipped him in the river at Marlow," I declared, "his head would never have come above the water while there was breath left in his body." Indeed, I felt murderously.

"I am glad you did not know for your own sake," said Melodé. "I felt merely anger at the time, but a few days later, when he sent me a collection of photographs I began to be afraid. He had recognised the remarkable likeness between myself and the Molly of ten years previous, and he sent them to me and asked whether I should prefer to have them published in one of the Parisian papers or copies sent to my friends in England."

"If ever I meet that scoundrel again——" I began, for my anger was now at white heat.

"Hush!" said Melodé, and looking away from her I observed that one or two strangers were eyeing us curiously.

"All right," I said, "I'll keep a curb on my tongue, though it is a hard task."

"It was no less hard a task for me to submit to such insult," she answered, "but I had to do so. I had to rescue Molly. I had to prevent, if possible, the annoyance which he had threatened me with; so I temporised. I came to England in order to provide for Molly's reception, and while over here I wrote to him begging him to do nothing until he heard from me again. He replied that the photographs and negatives should be his wedding present to me. Meanwhile I was in constant communication with Molly's attendant, and from one of her letters I learned that the photographs were in the same house as my sister. Then, when everything was arranged, I returned to Paris. I had determined that nothing should interfere with the success of my plan, and at the hour I had arranged to be at the house near Fontainebleau, I had invited d'Hautville to meet me at a rendezvous in Paris. You know the result of my venture, but you do not know, perhaps, that the box Molly brought with her contained, as I then thought, the whole of the negatives of the photographs which you saw later at the same place."

"Why did you not destroy them at the same time?" I asked.

"We were so pressed for time, and the door of the room was locked," she answered. "I had an impression that somebody was playing me false, and that was the reason why I asked your assistance earlier in the day. It has seemed clear to me since

that by some means d'Hautville must have got into communication with my maid Lucille, and that she must have learned enough to have given him an inkling of my plans, though I never told her anything of them."

"There's one thing puzzles me," I said, as Melodé paused in her narrative. "Having succeeded in your object, why did you not return at once to England?"

Lady Melodé blushed. "Vanity," she replied. "I had won, as I thought, and I wanted to show d'Hautville that he had been outwitted by a woman. I did not give him credit for his ingenuity. I wanted to triumph over him, and I wanted also to obtain the return of the letters I had written to him; so when I had seen Molly, who you will recall, escaped with me from the chateau with the box of negatives, in my motor, the day you first met me, safely off by train, I returned to the flat at the Quai d'Auteuil, which my maid Lucille, whom I had sent to Paris ahead of me, had taken for the purpose of the interview, and sent her with a message to him to tell him where he might find me. Then came his counterplot with Lucille to bring you on the scene, though I cannot understand how he can have brought that about. Still less can I conceive his object, unless he wanted to discover the extent of our acquaintance, and presuming we were not strangers, had already devised Lucille's murder, with the express object of bringing the charge of murder against

yourself. But I cannot bring myself to believe that."

"No," I agreed. "He could not have foreseen that he would have been left alone with her in the apartments. He probably reckoned that, not expecting my visit, you would have been angry at my presenting myself so unceremoniously, and that when I had departed he would have had an additional threat to use in urging you to comply with his wishes. Anyhow, I can only thank heaven that his counterplot succeeded in bringing me to the place. I don't like to think what might have happened had you been alone in the place with d'Hautville and Lucille."

"I had not thought of any danger to myself, and" —she blushed—"I do not think d'Hautville would have ventured on violence with me."

"Still I am glad I was there," I repeated.

"So am I," she replied softly, "if it was only for the purpose of learning that there are some situations with which a man can deal infinitely better than any woman."

For reply I squeezed the little hand nestling in mine.

"I thought when we were safely out of France that the matter was all over and done with, and then, learning that my cousin knew you, I persuaded him to ask you down for a week-end to auntie's house. It was at that very moment d'Hautville

chose to reappear. It was his car that passed ours on the return from Oxford. It was his chauffeur who brought me a note when you were inside the inn obtaining the water for the cooling apparatus. In that note he threatened that unless I saw him that same evening your life would not be worth a minute's purchase."

"Then it was for my sake that you met him by the river?" I asked.

"It was little I could do, and you had been so good to me," she answered. "Now you can understand better why I impersonated Lady Molly at Covent Garden on the night of the masque ball," she continued. "It seems that d'Hautville, learning in some way the whereabouts of my sister's retreat, had written to her, pleading for a rendezvous there. He expected, no doubt, again to make himself her master, and to use her suffering and disgrace as before for an additional weapon with which to bend my will to his. This letter came into my hands; and the same impulse to witness his chagrin at being outwitted by me which had led me to meet him in that lonely apartment by the Quai d'Auteuil, as well as the hope that I might find a means to secure the lost negative, impelled me to risk another interview. My plan was rendered less difficult because of the implicit directions given her in the letter as to costume, time, and exact place for the meeting, as well as a

warning not to remove her masque." Then she changed the subject suddenly.

"You must decide whether Mr. Mervyn should see Molly. I do not think she would recognise him, though it is quite possible that if she were to do so the shock might assist in restoring her reason."

"I will think it over," I said, and for the rest of the afternoon our conversation was not such as is likely to prove interesting to any one but our two selves.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RECKONING WITH M. LE COMTE D'HAUTVILLE

WITHIN twenty-four hours of the conversation between myself and Lady Melodé which I have chronicled in the preceding chapter, the two of us were on our way to visit the most unfortunate of all the victims of d'Hautville's machinations. There was a third person accompanying us. Being unable to decide for myself as to whether Mervyn should see her or not, I had left the decision to my friend, and he had settled the question in the affirmative. Consequently he accompanied Melodé and me to the retreat in Surrey where his old love was living, under the kindly care of a doctor and his wife.

I shall never forget that day so long as I live, so charged was it with emotion. In the first place, there was the meeting between Mervyn and Melodé. Mervyn had accompanied me to Claridge's, and we were waiting in Mrs. Duxworth's sitting-room when Melodé entered. I sprang forward to greet her, but was checked by her glance and the words, "Your friend!"

I turned to look at Mervyn. His face was ghastly

in its pallor, while his fingers moved convulsively as he tore at the collar of his coat. "What's the matter?" I cried, as I caught him by the arm.

His lips were dry, but I guessed at his thoughts, for I could see rather than hear that he was striving to articulate the name Molly. "No," I said, and taking him by both elbows I shook him violently. "This is Melodé. Don't you understand? This is Melodé."

"Melodé?" he said slowly. "Melodé?" He looked at me and again at her, and gradually the colour came back to his lips, and he dropped into a chair.

We were all silent for a while, and then he apologised. "I could not help myself," he said. "There is so wonderful a likeness. It was a ten years' memory suddenly incarnate. You must forgive me, Lady Melodé."

"I fear you will find Molly vastly changed from the memory you have preserved so faithfully," she said sadly. "Are you quite sure that you had better see her?"

"More certain than ever," he answered.

There was nothing more to be said, and we set off together. We went by car, and the whole of the time Mervyn's eyes scarcely wandered once from my companion; and though he said little, I could see his brain was active. No one who had only been acquainted with him in the club would have imagined that such a volcano of emotion was dormant beneath the quiet exterior of the cynical clubman.

Then there was the meeting with Molly. I do not know what Mervyn expected, but I was prepared to be shocked. Like most people, I suppose I associated the thought of madness with the gibberings and mouthings and extravagant gestures of mania. But there was nothing of the maniac about Lady Molly. She shrank into the room where we waited her arrival in a vain endeavour to hide herself behind her attendant. A woman frail as a shadow, prematurely old and grey, with fear in her eyes, fear about the tremulous mouth, fear in every gesture. She looked, acted like a shadow—a shadow of my own darling, who stood beside her, brimming over with life and health. Yes, despite the vast difference, the wonderful likeness which had left Mervyn bereft of speech was still visible. Truly her fault must have been atoned a thousand times before suffering had brought her to such a pass. I could only wonder what was the nature of the cruelty which had left fear impressed so deeply on her features and whole personality. I was soon to learn. Her very first words revealed the secret.

"I am glad to see you—so glad. I don't see many friends, you know. Ivan and I—Ivan and I are such happy people. You know what he is, but I'll let you into a secret—he has never seen anyone so beautiful as I am. The Goddess of Love, you know. A man has no eyes for mere mortals when he worships Venus herself. And—hush!—I am Venus,

you know, though I am obliged to disguise myself. If you would like to see——"

With a word Melodé checked her as she began to throw off a shawl which was on her shoulders.

"No, it doesn't matter. Ivan will show you the pictures. But no—no—no! You are strangers! Ivan shall not show them to you! I cannot—no, not again, Ivan! You shall not photograph me again! You said no eye but your own should rest on them! I—but yes, I am Venus—you shall not send me back to England! Anything rather than that! But where is Ivan? I think I am forgetting. He will be here directly."

She came to me and laid a hand on my arm. "Hush!" she said. "When he asks you to see his photographs, say that you have done so. He promised me that no one but himself should ever do so."

"I'll promise," I answered.

She went to Mervyn. "You will promise, too?" All the time she had been glancing at the door, as if she feared that some one else would enter; but at this moment she raised her eyes to Mervyn's face. They rested there, and she passed her hand across her forehead. "I have seen you before," she said. "You were kind to me, but I have a bad memory for faces. You will forgive me—I didn't catch your name."

Mervyn's face was nearly as white as it had been in the sitting-room at Claridge's, but he pulled him-

self together, and in a low voice he asked: "Shall I tell her?"

Melodé nodded.

"Mervyn," he said. "Meredith Mervyn, Lady Molly."

His voice, husky though it was—probably the name itself—struck an answering chord in her distraught brain. "Yes," she said. "You were very good to me. I am sure you would not like to see the photographs."

"No," said Mervyn.

"I was sure you would say that. But it is very stupid of me—I cannot remember where we met before. Perhaps I shall remember presently. You do forgive me, don't you?"

"God knows I do!" replied Mervyn, and his words meant, as two of us there present knew, far more than the others could have had any idea of. The tension was becoming unbearable, and Melodé saw that we could not stand the strain much longer, for she gave a word to the attendant and she and her patient disappeared.

"It is always like that with strangers," she said, when Lady Molly was gone. "Until she gets to know them. Then she might be almost rational, except that she has very little memory for anything. Now will you wait here or in the garden while I go and spend a little more time with her?"

We chose the garden, and for an hour we paced

the walk in silence, each of us busy with his own thoughts.

There can be no question that we were both animated by one idea, for when the summons came to bid us rejoin Lady Melodé, Mervyn said to me: "I shall start for Paris to-morrow."

"It is my turn now," I answered eagerly, knowing what must have been in his mind.

"No, Hardinge," he said, "this is my affair. You have Lady Melodé to think of. I have no one in the world to trouble about me. You must leave me to write the word 'settled' to this long outstanding account. If I fail, then I shall depend upon you to take up the settlement."

"We will talk it over," I replied, and with that we went indoors again.

We did not mention the matter again until we were alone together, late in the evening. Lady Melodé and the Duxworths were dining with me, and we went on to the theatre afterwards, so that it was not until I dropped in, quite late, at the club that I could have the matter out with Mervyn. We could not come to an agreement even then. He was keen on his right to exact vengeance. I was equally keen on my right to mete out retribution for the wrong which had been done the unfortunate woman who was soon to become my sister-in-law, for at last Melodé had said yes to my persuasions.

Immediately upon our return I had begged for

her answer, for I had realised that she had only put me off hitherto until I should have been able to judge for myself from my own experience the unfortunate fate which had fallen upon her sister. And when I strove to explain that all I had learnt had only deepened my admiration and my love—well, I am not going to set down in ink the sweet words that fell from her lips. Some things even a vain man does not write.

But that is merely by the way, though it serves to explain why I insisted so energetically on my claim to have first call on d'Hautville for satisfaction. For a long while Mervyn would not budge from his determination, but at last he did seem to give way, and he asked me what measures I contemplated taking. I had considered no means.

"It is not a difficult matter to pick a quarrel with a man," I said, "and quarrelling with discretion in France can only lead to one termination."

"The sort of termination that I experienced," said my friend, sarcastically.

"That is as fate directs," I answered. "But I believe in my luck where d'Hautville is concerned."

"Have your own way," he answered. "I do not think that he will manage to escape the two of us."

The matter was not mentioned between us again. For one reason, my time was so fully occupied that I did not see Mervyn again while I was in England. I had no time for the club, and I had my plans to

make, in the event in what I had determined should be our final encounter, d'Hautville should score the last trick and win the rubber. Not that I anticipated any such result. I felt perfectly confident that the luck would remain with me.

As the few days for remaining in town which were at my disposal passed, however, I began to see that my own confidence was not completely shared by Melodé. She did not, as before the trials, make any suggestion that I should withdraw from the race for the cup, but from her perpetual adjurations to me to be on my guard, and to take no extra risks, I could see that she was more than a little anxious as to the outcome of my visit, even though she was entirely ignorant of the purpose I had in view. Still she strove to hide her fears from me, and it was with a smiling face that she bade me farewell at Charing Cross and gave me a last wish for my success.

"I'll bring back the cup as my wedding gift for you," I said, "and you shall drink from it a draught that shall make you forget all the troubles of the past."

"I don't want to forget," she said, "for through them I have found you. But I do want to be free from a renewal of them in the future."

"I will see if I cannot bring a sufficient assurance back with me," I answered. Then there was only time for a final "good-bye" before the train started.

I stayed the night in Paris, and the next morning I went on direct to Royat. I had left myself about ten days for practice over the course, ample time, as I thought, since I was already fairly well acquainted with it; but the weather, which had been fine and bright for weeks past, suddenly changed, and, much to my disgust, motoring became merely another name for a new form of mudlarking. For five days the rain fell. The roads, churned up by the wheels of the fifteen practising racers, and assisted by any number of touring cars, got into a deplorable condition. Under such conditions, tempers became short, and the looks of the majority of the people one met were as black as the skies. Cars which had been running with perfect smoothness hitherto, developed all sorts of defects, and the man who took his car out and brought it back without having at once to refit some part or another, was looked upon as a peculiarly lucky mortal. In this respect I was one of the favoured ones. Though I had my troubles—and the heavy roads developed one or two hitherto unsuspected weaknesses—yet these were of a trivial description, and in no one instance was any material portion of the machinery proven to be defective. Principally this was due to the admirable construction of the car, but still a great deal of credit must also be given to Coles, who was indefatigable in the attention he paid to his charge. Only for meals could he be persuaded to trust the car out

of his sight, and he had even arranged, as I found out on the night of my arrival, to sleep in the garage. When I remonstrated with him for taking my injunction to see that the car was not tampered with so literally, he replied: "Best to take no risks, sir, with all these foreigners about. If any of them knew that we were bound to win they would not think twice about loosening a nut somewhere or dropping a bit of steel into one of the gearings."

I laughed at him, but he insisted upon pleasing himself as to his sleeping place. On the fifth day after my arrival at Royat the weather cleared again, and, holding fine on the sixth and seventh, under the influence of a steady breeze and bright sun, the roads dried, except in one or two sheltered spots.

On the seventh day I made a trial spin under excellent conditions, and I returned to my hotel thoroughly well pleased with everything. My chances were promising, the weather seemed settled finally, and that morning I had received a delightful letter from Melodé.

It was at that moment, for the first time since I had been at Royat, I came face to face with d'Hautville. How I had escaped meeting him before I do not know. He, with most of the other competitors, had been on the ground before I had arrived, and though I had met all the others I had missed him. I had, in fact, decided that the avoidance had been intentional on his part, for I had not

even troubled to make an enquiry about him, being quite content to wait until after the race to force the meeting I desired. But if such avoidance had been intentional, it was soon made obvious to me that it was not due to any desire on d'Hautville's part to shirk the issue.

I was walking into the salon of my hotel as he was emerging in company with one of the other French representatives and two of the Italian competitors. I knew the three of them, and I stopped to speak to them. In the most natural manner in the world the Frenchman made d'Hautville known to me, evidently concluding that as I had not included him in my greeting that we were unacquainted.

"I already know M. le Comte," I explained. "I do not desire to improve my acquaintance."

D'Hautville heard me, and his face flushed very slightly, for I had spoken with some emphasis. He shrugged his shoulders as he remarked: "M. Hardinge has, I believe, a cause for quarrel with me?"

"Merely the quarrel which any honest man has with an ordinary liar, bully, and thief!" I replied, suavely, feeling exceedingly pleased with myself that there were several witnesses.

There was no doubt about the flush on d'Hautville's face by this time, and he made a half step towards me. Again a ready retort came to my lips. "Pray consider, m'sieu. You know that I can hit

hard, and I should be sorry to spoil your physical charms before the day of the race."

"You will answer for this insult, m'sieu," he said.

"When and where you please," I said, "though I hope you will not keep me waiting much longer. I had thought that the thrashing I gave you on Christmas night had entirely passed from your memory."

His face was by this time livid with rage. "Let it be now!" he screamed. He turned to his companion. "You will do me the honour?"

But all the three men who had been with him, and half a dozen others who had gathered about us, interposed, and there was a babel of tongues arguing that it was impossible for any of the candidates in the race to fight before the race was decided. I stood and listened, with my hands in my pockets. I did not care much which way the matter was decided; and when, between them, they had come to the conclusion that the race was to take precedence over private animosities, I accepted the decision philosophically, perhaps the more because I knew how strong were my chances of winning, and I overheard d'Hautville remark: "It is good. First I will beat him in the race, and then I will put an end to his chagrin."

I did not think overmuch of the matter, though I told Coles of the encounter, with the remark: "You see, if we pull off the race I shall start a strong fav-

ourite for the double event." I laugh to myself now when I remember his expression as I concluded. I fancy he thought that excitement had turned my brain.

I slept well that night, and was out as usual the next morning. But this morning the post failed me. There was no letter from Melodé. When I returned to déjeuner there was still no letter. I began to feel anxious. Then came a telegram, and I tore open the envelope feverishly to read: "Meet me Gare de Lyons to-night. Melodé."

CHAPTER XXV

BEFORE THE JUGE D'INSTRUCTION

THE train steamed into the Gare de Lyons, and catching up my coat and bag I sprang out on to the platform and hastened towards the barrier. But before I reached it my heart sank. There were only half a dozen people gathered to meet the train, and Melodé was not amongst them. A premonition of evil assailed me. What if the telegram were a forgery, a trick to draw me to Paris, on the part of d'Hautville? If I had only thought over the matter before starting on the journey, I might have suspected some such move. But I had not had time for consideration. The last train of the day from Clermont-Ferrand had left so soon after the arrival of the wire that only by making use of the car which had been waiting to take me for another run round the course had I been able to catch it. Besides, I had been so delighted at the belief that after all Melodé had decided to come over for the race, that I had not given a thought to any other possibility.

I moderated my pace, and, passing the barrier, placed my bag on the ground and looked round me.

Melodé might have been detained on her way to the station, and, as I had no plans, I might as well wait there as anywhere. Then a quietly dressed man who had been waiting outside the barrier came up to me, and, raising his hat, enquired politely, in perfectly good English, "Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge, I believe?"

"That is my name," I said.

"Then I must trouble you to come with me, if you please."

"Come with you? What in the world for?" I asked, my suspicions at once becoming lively.

"M. le Juge d'Instruction is desirous of some little conversation with you, m'sieu," was the imperturbable reply, and he produced the card for my inspection, which revealed him to be a member of the detective police.

I shrank from him instinctively. In spite of my earlier fears, in spite of d'Hautville's threats, in spite of Mervyn's warnings, I had persuaded myself that there was no danger to myself likely to accrue in connection with the death of Lucille Clement, and now, when I least expected it, the blow had fallen. Unfortunately, I had no time for deliberation as to the best course to pursue, and I was completely at a loss.

"I should be pleased to oblige M. le Juge," I replied, "but unfortunately I have a previous engagement. I am expecting a lady to meet me here."

"Alas!" replied the detective, "I fear that madame will be disappointed. M. le Juge is of a peremptory disposition."

"At least you will permit me to wait for a few minutes so that I may explain where I am going," I said.

"It is, I fear, impossible," he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Much as I should like to oblige m'sieu, it is not within my power."

"But——" I began.

"I have a fiacre in waiting," he continued, and as I still hesitated, he added: "Besides, who knows whether the lady m'sieu wishes to meet may not have preceded m'sieu?"

I felt horribly uncomfortable at the suggestion. It would never do for Lady Melodé's name to be mixed up with this affair. In a moment I was as eager to depart before she could arrive at the station as I had previously been anxious to remain.

"Very well," I remarked resignedly. "I accompany you, m'sieu."

The man turned briskly on his heel towards the exit from the station, and I, observing that another man who had been dawdling near, had turned to follow us, walked by his side. Clearly I had done well by not refusing to obey the request of the detective.

We got into the fiacre, and the man who had followed mounted the box beside the driver, and away

we drove. We had not far to go. Ten minutes, at the outside, was sufficient time to enable us to reach a building which I recognised as a police prefecture, and, the vehicle pulling up, we dismounted and entered. My companion had been chattering to me all the way, but I had merely answered in monosyllables. I was striving to decide upon the best attitude to adopt in order to explain why I had not at the first possible moment given information regarding the crime I knew to have been committed. But I could think of no likely excuse, and I could only curse my own folly as I followed the detective into the prefecture and along a passage into a little room at the end. There I was accommodated with a chair, and my companion took up a position near the door and became silent. I glanced round the room idly. It was an ordinary little office, with a table and three or four chairs, an ante-room to the examining magistrate's apartment, I judged, for every now and again I heard a voice in a room beyond.

I had not to wait long before I discovered my surmise to be correct. The interior door opened and a police warder emerged, and, beckoning to me, held open the door, and, as I entered the further room, closed it behind me without a word.

I found myself in a comfortable, well-lighted room occupied by a man seated at a desk. As I entered he raised his eyes from the papers before

him and glanced at me; then rising from his seat, he made me a polite bow, and remarked: "M. Geoffrey Hardinge, is it not, whom I have the pleasure to receive in my office?"

His courtesy would have been sufficient under ordinary circumstances to assure me that he was not harbouring the slightest idea that I was under the imputation of a criminal charge, but I knew enough of the methods of French criminal procedure to be assured that I could draw no such deduction from his manner.

"I am Mr. Geoffrey Hardinge, a British subject," I replied, a trifle stiffly, "and as such demand to know the reason for this strange summons."

The Juge d'Instruction left his place at the table and, walking to the fireplace, planted himself before it, and for a minute regarded me in silence. His scrutiny annoyed me, and I said, irritably:

"Come, m'sieu, I have a right to an answer to my question. I presume you did not bring me here merely to look at me."

The judge took no notice of my impatience. He raised his hand, and pointing at me with his index finger, he said: "M. Hardinge, on the night of the 25th of December last you met a girl called Lucille Clement at the Café du Quatz' Arts?"

"Yes," I answered.

"You acknowledge it?" he asked.

"Certainly," I replied. "There is no reason why I should not do so."

"Perhaps, then, you will not object to tell me whither you accompanied her?"

"I have no objection whatever," I answered promptly. "I accompanied her to a house on the Quai d'Auteuil."

"With what object, m'sieu?"

"I prefer not to state the object," I answered.

"But why, m'sieu?" he asked. "We are alone. You may confide in me. You may rely on my discretion."

"The object was one which does not concern myself alone," I said. "I have no option in the matter."

"Perhaps you will consider the matter later," he continued. "Meanwhile, am I correct in assuming that on December the 30th you met the girl Clement again?"

"No," I replied, wonderingly.

"Think, m'sieu," he said. "It was not an ordinary meeting; far otherwise. Was it not on the 30th that you met the girl in the Morgue?"

"I misunderstood you, m'sieu," I replied. "It is true that on the 30th, upon visiting the Morgue, I recognised the body of the girl whom I only knew as Lucille lying there."

"And why, may I ask, m'sieu," said my interrogator, "did you not at once make known your rec-

ognition of the girl to the authorities? Will you explain why, when you gazed upon her dead face, that your emotion was so great that you had to cling for support to the rail, that you staggered from the spot, and within the next two days had fled from Paris?" Coldly and dispassionately he threw the questions at me, and with an accusing finger pointed at me he waited for my reply.

And I had no reply to make save one. I shrugged my shoulders. "Because I was a fool, m'sieu," I replied.

I fancied I saw a gleam of amusement in his face as he replied quickly: "Such frankness is charming, but might I be permitted to remark that it is so rare that one is inclined to doubt the ingenuousness of such a plea."

I saw my difficulty, and determined at once to make a clean breast of the whole matter. "If you have time to listen to a lengthy narrative, m'sieu," I said, "you will better be able to judge of the reasons which actuated my conduct."

"I am at your disposal," he replied, and motioning me to a chair, he seated himself at his desk. "I should perhaps warn m'sieu that it is advisable that he should make as few reservations as may be."

"I intend to make only one reservation, and that will be the name of a lady," I answered, and without more ado I plunged into the story of the events which had preceded and succeeded the death of

Lucille. Now and again he interrupted my narrative with a question, but by his manner he gave me not the slightest indication as to whether he thought that I was speaking the truth or not. But when I had done he looked at me and asked me quietly: "And this story of yours, m'sieu, you will be willing to repeat in the presence of M. le Comte d'Hautville?"

"I am willing to repeat it under oath in any one's presence," I answered warmly, for I thought I detected a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"And, of course, you will be able to bring forward witnesses to vouch for the essential details?" he asked.

"I should ask that your officers should test the truth of my statements for themselves," I answered, quietly.

The Juge d'Instruction rose from his seat again, and, approaching me, held out his hand. "M. Hardinge," he said, "it is fortunate for you that our agents have already prepared me to believe the story that you have told me, otherwise your folly might have produced consequences to yourself which I will not particularise. But I must warn you, m'sieu, that you have a dangerous and active enemy, against whom it behooves you to be on your guard."

"I take it that the question whether he is likely to prove dangerous to me rests very much in your hands," I said bluntly.

"Ah! There is your mistake, m'sieu," he replied. "You must be aware how strongly circumstances conspired to make you appear guilty. Would it surprise you to learn that our investigations into this crime have already sufficiently exonerated M. le Comte d'Hautville?"

"But he must have had some hand in the business," I declared. "How, otherwise, is his knowledge of it to be explained?"

"It is not for me to explain at the moment," he answered suavely. "And now perhaps you will allow me to apologise for the trouble I have been compelled to cause you, and to retire while you make good the appointment which brought you to Paris."

He rose, and, bowing, left me alone in the room, at a complete loss to understand the meaning of his words. The door had hardly closed behind him, however, before it opened again and Melodé entered. I could scarcely believe my eyes. "Melodé!" I cried. "You here? Have these rascals dared——" I could get no further, for rage choked my utterance.

"Geoffrey!" she ejaculated, with a little cry of delight, as she threw herself into my arms. "You must not be angry, for those rascals have somehow managed to get at the truth, and have made all d'Hautville's machinations of no avail."

Whose anger would not prove evanescent at such news, especially as the outcome had brought my

fiancée to France just when I had desired her to come?

"I don't think I will blame them, then," I said, with an assumption of magnanimity, "for one reason at least."

"And what is that?" asked my dear one.

"Because you will be just in time to see me win the race for the cup."

Then the door opened again, and the Juge d'Instruction re-entered, but he was not alone. He was accompanied by Mervyn.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RACE FOR THE AMATEUR CUP

I WAS a long way past astonishment by this time, and when Mervyn entered the room I shook hands with him and said, "Awfully glad to see you, old chap," as if his presence there was a most matter-of-fact occurrence.

"One would have thought that you expected to see me," he said, a couple of hours later. But that was when we were alone together, after we had supped, had returned to our hotel, and Melodé had betaken herself to bed. By that time I was acquainted with the reasons which had brought him on the scene. I found that a telegram had been addressed to Melodé, in my name, making an appointment to meet me in Paris, and that, distrusting the authenticity of the message, she had bethought herself of Mervyn, and under his charge had determined to keep the appointment. As in my case, she had been met at the railway station by a detective and had been escorted to the Juge d'Instruction, who had afterwards examined me. To her, however, the magistrate had solemnly asseverated that the tele-

gram she had received had not emanated from the Parisian police, though they had been apprised anonymously of her arrival, and had thought the time opportune for obtaining some particulars of Lucille's life while in her service, to aid them in their investigations. She, like myself, had thought it wise to relate the whole of the circumstances of the case to the Juge, though she had made no reservations as to my name. Thus my story, corroborated by hers in every particular, gained immensely in credibility. That was the extent of the information which Melodé could pass on to me, and though it left us all absolutely in the dark as to the solution of the mystery of Lucille's murder, yet it relieved my mind infinitely to think that there was no possibility of any charge of being concerned in the affair being brought against me. Yet I could not understand how d'Hautville had also been exonerated. Anyhow, it was obvious that if he had not been the murderer he must have some information in his possession which had enabled him to marshal the evidence in such a way as to throw suspicion upon myself. I could only pay a hearty tribute to the acumen of the police and the Juge d'Instruction for having penetrated the infamous design. I need hardly add that my determination to exact retribution from my enemy was none the less decided because his plot had failed.

I expressed my sentiments on the subject to Mer-

vyn pretty vigorously, and he was so heartily in agreement with me that I told him of the quarrel which had already taken place, and of the postponement of hostilities until after the race.

He looked at me with a queer grin on his face. "Of all the self-confident people I ever met, I think you take the cake, Hardinge," he said. "You seem to be as certain of winning the race and then escaping the fire of one of the first shots in Europe as you are of your breakfast to-morrow morning."

"Can't help it," I answered. "I suppose it is my nature. But speaking of breakfast, reminds me that if I am to keep my nerves in proper order it is time I went to bed."

Mervyn laughed right out at that, and we both made our way to the lift.

I had a night of undisturbed repose, and came down as fresh as a lark. Melodé and Mervyn soon joined me, and we bustled off to the railway station en route for Royat.

The journey itself was uneventful, but plenty of material for conversation was afforded us by reason of an announcement in one of the papers of an arrest in connection with the murder of Lucille Clement. The paragraph was only a brief one, though it was made the occasion for the retailing of the whole story of the murder as it had been printed months previously. And according to the paragraphist, the man arrested was an old lover of

the girl, whom she had discarded when she had entered Lady Melodé's service.

I was disposed to discredit the accuracy of the report, but not so Mervyn. It gave him the cue for a theory which eventually proved almost so exactly accurate that I cannot do better than give it here.

"This is the view I take," he said. "When Lucille greeted you in so demonstrative a fashion in the Café du Quatz' Arts her former lover must have been in the audience, and, his jealousy being aroused, he must have followed you out and probably heard the direction you gave to the cabman. It was too far for him to go that night, but he remembered the address, and determined to call in your absence. Meanwhile, you had departed from Paris, leaving d'Hautville and Lucille together. D'Hautville had evidently already made a conquest of the girl, and there is nothing more likely than that he would remain for a few days in her company. He was driving a red car at the time, and though, except in height, he was not likely to be mistaken for you, Hardinge, yet he probably managed to dress so as to be mistaken for you, with a view of obtaining compromising evidence against Lady Melodé. Then in his absence from the apartments occupied by Lucille, the old lover made his appearance. Naturally, Lucille, dazzled by her conquest of d'Hautville, rejected his proposals to return to him, and in a moment of frenzy he struck her to the heart. Then

d'Hautville returned. His first thought would be of his own safety, and not wishing for investigation, he probably disposed of the body in the easiest way—the Seine was easily accessible. In doing so, he was probably guided by the thought that the evidence which he was manufacturing against Lady Melodé would, in such case, be available against you, Hardinge, and it was only your immediate flight from Paris that same night which could have saved you from arrest. As it was, he was compelled to wait until time had either dimmed the witnesses' memories for dates, or he had had an opportunity of getting them out of the way, before denouncing you."

"A pretty theory," I declared, "but still only a theory."

"True," replied Mervyn, "but remember what the magistrate said to you about the police enquiries having already exonerated d'Hautville."

But I could not bring myself to believe the theory and the discussion lasted until we detrained at Clermont-Ferrand station.

Thereafter we had something else to think about. The one subject which occupied the attention of every one was the race. In fact, it would have been impossible for anyone to think of anything else. The whole country was seized with the automobile fever, of which the bacilli, of enormous size and power, were visible everywhere. Flitting to and fro, the

majority without silencers, in order that they might announce their presence the more unmistakably, the cars made it almost impossible to hear one's self speak.

Melodé closed her ears with her hands, in mock horror at the din, and declared that she would return to Paris forthwith. But the threat was an idle one, for the wonderful amount of movement soon produced the natural effect, and before we had reached our hotel at Royat she was far more excited over the coming contest than myself. Luckily, I had wired for Coles to send down one of his assistants with my touring car to meet us, for there was not a vehicle to be obtained for love or money. Lucky, too, was it that I had engaged a suite of rooms at my hotel, so that I had sufficient accommodation for the whole party by getting another temporary bed put up in one room for Mervyn to occupy jointly with myself.

We all of us went to bed early that night. Melodé was tired with the journey, and I was anxious for a good night's rest in view of the strain of the morrow's event. Besides, we had to be up at 3.30 in order to be present at the start.

I was restless during the night, much to my chagrin, for I wanted all my wits about me for the ensuing day, and I was glad when I was called. A bath put me in better fettle, and I managed to do full justice to the meal prepared for us. At four we

were in the car, en route for the starting place at Laschamps. The scene was a remarkable one. The procession of cars and of pedestrians on the way to the starting place was continuous, and our progress was naturally slow. We did not arrive at the weighing-in tent until half an hour before the start, and I found Coles nervously awaiting my arrival. I do not know what he would have done had some accident prevented my putting in an appearance. Anyhow, he welcomed me with unfeigned delight.

There was plenty of time, for although the first car was to be started at 6 A.M., I was seventh on the list, and five minutes' interval was allowed between the sending off of each car. The draw had placed d'Hautville fifth, so that if I passed him at any point, and held my supremacy to the end, I should know that one of my objects would be achieved.

The time did not hang on my hands, for there were a number of details to be attended to, and I nearly missed seeing d'Hautville start, owing to my preoccupation with matters of detail. But I managed to be at the line a minute before he was sent on his journey, and I was glad to see that he recognised that I was present. When his glance rested on me, and passed from me to Lady Melodé, I saw a grim scowl pass across his face, and I knew that I should be called upon to do my best.

Melodé observed his appearance at the same time

as myself, and her hand tightened on my arm. "You will be careful, Geoffrey," she whispered. "He means mischief."

"I'll trust to the talisman you gave me," I replied, and I held up my hand to show that the ring was still on my finger.

He went away with admirable precision. He was driving a 96-h.p. Richard Brasier, and he took only sixty seconds to disappear from sight behind the clump of chestnuts which marked the vanishing point on the rise towards the Col de la Moreno.

"We shall have our work cut out to overtake him," I remarked to Coles, who was at my elbow, as I put the watch with which I had been timing d'Hautville into my pocket.

"If he cannot do better than that, we shall catch him on the second round," said Coles, "for we have twice done the distance in fifty-four."

The succeeding ten minutes dragged more than the whole of the previous time, and I was profoundly thankful when my turn came to take my seat and await the signal. The engine was started. I said a word of farewell to Melodé. Coles sat, alert, at my side, and then we were away.

I cannot give an account of the race itself. I do not yet know any one who ever took part in a motor race who could give more than an impressionist sketch of the incidents. The man who drives a car has no eyes for anything but the road in front of

him, and no ears for aught but the throb of the engine, until he comes in sight of the car that started in front of him. Then a third factor is added to his calculations, and even if, before, he has had a thought to spare for anything else, from that time forth he forgets everything but the desire to pass his adversary. And this fever gripped me early in the race for the Amateur Cup. Not half way round the first round of the circuit I viewed the car which had started immediately before mine, and with a rush I was past and away. Then for a long while the road was clear, and not until we sighted the starting place, at the end of the first round, did I catch sight of another car. But there, as we came into the straight, I saw a car ahead, and, trusting that it was d'Hautville's, I shouted to Coles to slightly increase the charge of petrol, and I thundered down the straight stretch in magnificent fashion.

I passed that car half way up the incline, but the colour showed me that it was not my chief adversary's car, and I realised that he, too, must have already passed this man.

I saw nothing of him on the second round, though three more of the cars which had preceded me I passed on the course. I began to feel anxious. His Brasier was running well, evidently, and for aught I knew he might be increasing his lead.

I urged Coles to do everything he knew to accelerate our progress, though with but faint hopes that

he would be able to do anything more than he had done already.

We entered upon the third round. By this time the competing cars were spread out upon the course and through the blinding clouds of dust it was nearly impossible to distinguish the cars ahead, and quite impossible to distinguish which particular car was passed.

Yet, as once again we came to the starting post, I sighted a car which I knew instinctively to be that of my enemy. We flashed by the grand-stand not fifteen seconds behind him, and I knew that I had only to retain the advantage to be declared the winner. But I was not going to be satisfied with that sort of victory. I wanted to be the first to finish, so that my victory should be patent to every one, and thereafter I took chances that I had avoided on previous rounds. My temerity was rewarded. Yard by yard I drew nearer, until inches only separated the two cars. Then my car drew level. For seconds—it seemed minutes to me—the cars hung together. Then d'Hautville's car dropped behind.

At the moment of passing d'Hautville recognised me. How I knew that he had done so I cannot exactly tell, but I fancied that I heard my name coupled with a curse screamed after me. I would fain now have moderated my pace, but I dared not. D'Hautville's car was still close at my heels, and a minute

or so later Coles shouted in my ear that it was in its turn gaining on us.

It was in this order that we approached the dreaded Rochefort corner, and here was a risk that I could not take at full speed without a certainty of destruction. I postponed the change of speed until the last possible moment, and was just on the turn when I heard a yell from Coles.

"Let her go, sir!" he shouted, and on the instant I jammed the lever on to the highest speed. If ever good mechanism and a good mechanician saved a man's life, mine was saved in that instant. The clutch gripped, and with a jar that threatened to tear the car to pieces she leaped forward.

It was not a moment too soon. The death that raced at our heels missed us by inches only. I was not aware of my escape at the time. I saw nothing of the danger, and it was not until the race was over, and I had whirled in first, and alone, that I heard what had happened.

"Why did you tell me to put on my top speed at the corner?" I asked Coles.

"I thought if the other chap wanted to commit suicide there was no reason why he should do so at our expense, sir," he replied.

"I don't understand," I said.

"It was like this," he explained. "Whether the driver of the car we passed at Rochefort forgot whereabouts he was, or whether he was so mad at

our passing him that he determined that, if he could not win, neither should we, I cannot tell. But when we slowed down for the turn he kept on his highest, and picked us up hand over hand. He was steering a line which would have just brought him into us when we were half round. He only cleared us by inches."

"Well?" I asked.

"It was his last chance," said Coles, "for he took the wall on the right. I don't suppose that there is much of his car left at all events."

* * * * *

Coles was right in his supposition. There was very little of the car left, and when d'Hautville was extricated from the wreckage he was beyond the possibility of doing any more harm to anyone. Fate had stepped in and robbed both Mervyn and myself of the opportunity of calling him to account for his misdeeds—or was it Providence? Lady Melodé Hardinge, *née* Temple, declares that my escape was due to the protective influence of the ring she had given me. I laugh at the theory—and wear the ring.

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